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**SUCH AN ENMITY**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FISH ARE SUCH LIARS.  
THE MILLION-POUND CYPHER.  
IT MEANS MISCHIEF.  
PRINCE OF ROMANCE.  
PURSUIT.  
INTERFERENCE.  
RIVERS TO CROSS.  
THE ROMANCE OF NIKKO CHEYNE.  
TRANSACTIONS OF LORD LOUIS  
LEWIS.  
NO SUCH WORD.  
MOROSCO.  
FOUR WINDS.

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# SUCH AN ENMITY

*A Novel*

BY

ROLAND PERTWEE

1936

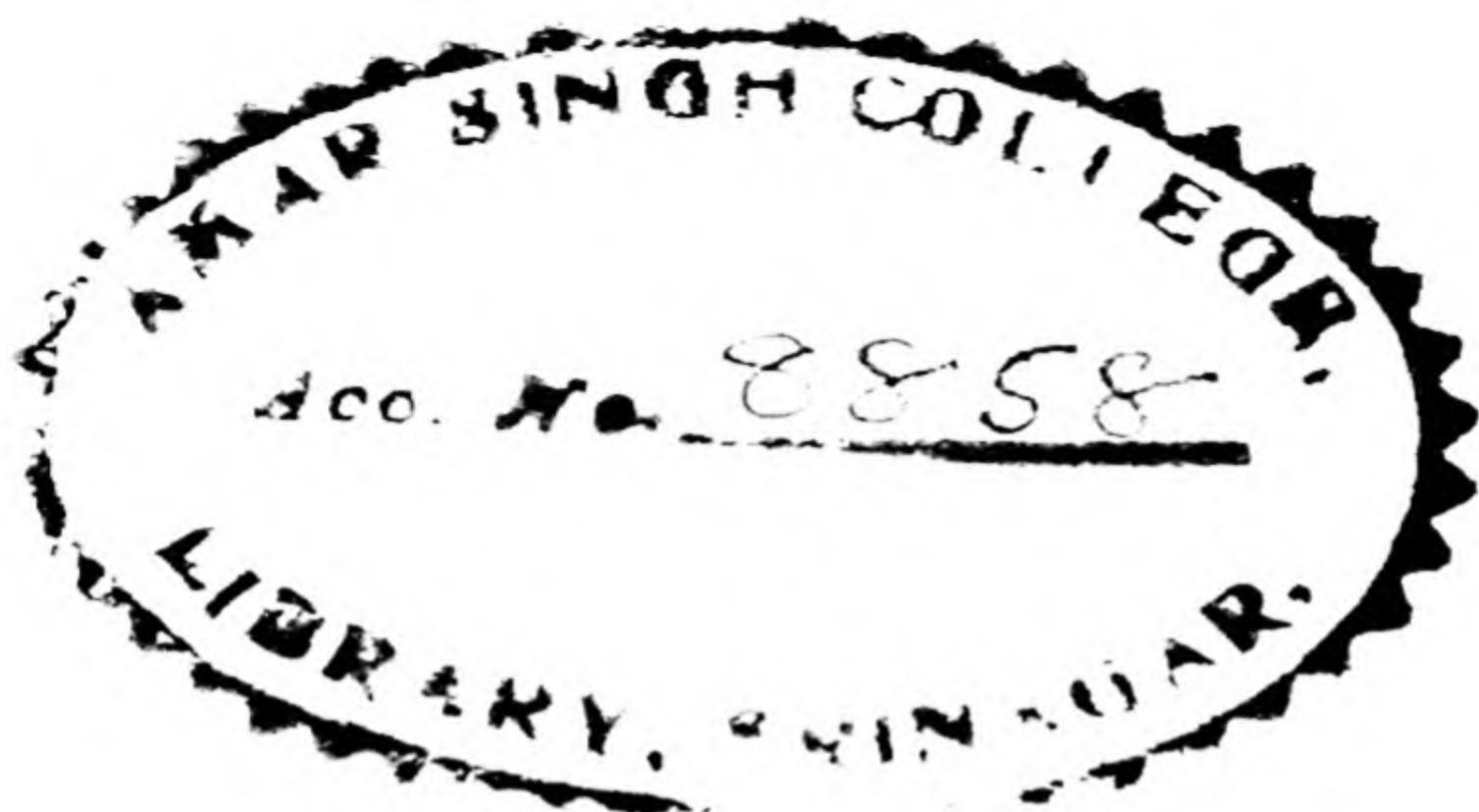
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*First published in 1936*

**“The lep’rous distilment, whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man. . . .”**

**HAMLET.**



To

NOEL STREATFIELD

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1956.

# SUCH AN ENMITY

## PART I

### I.

MOUNTAINS OF THE Alpes Maritimes: green in their hollows; slopes grey-green or madder with pines, cork trees and tumbles of rock; summits patterned with unmelted snow.

A needle-pointed wind pricking a rosier colour on the cheeks of the girl who walked beside the donkey.

The girl, Richenda Warrant—twenty years old—hatless, wearing grey flannel trousers, a zebra pullover, brown curls and a very troubled expression.

The donkey, Modestine, with panniers and little pointed hoofs, clicking and sparkling on the stones, or splashing through the water runnels that sluice the mountain-side.

And sprawled full length behind a rock, a pipe in his mouth and a haversack behind his head, a man, Miles Farady, M.D., L.R.C.P., enjoying the space, the silence and the free airs of heaven, and glad that his job as medical attendant to a millionaire did not start until the morrow.

The clicking and the splashing grew nearer. Then the girl spoke her thoughts aloud.

"If he doesn't want me I guess I can get along all right. I've a darned good mind to pack my traps and go right back to New York."

Miles Farady heaved himself up from behind the rock. He had no choice, for it is unfair to listen to a girl who is talking to herself.

"Must you?" he said. "This seems such a nice place."

The roses in Richenda's cheeks turned an angry red. Her brows came together with a snap.

"I wasn't talking to you."

He tried to look crestfallen, but made a poor job of it. He had thought the place lovely before she appeared, but now its beauties had become a mere background.

Richenda thought:

"I wish he was ugly and fat and vile; then I'd sling a rock at him. But he's none of those things. He's lean and brown and the kind of man a girl like me could be fond of."

But she went on frowning.

Farady said:

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise you had a companion. What's her name?"

She did not intend to answer, but she did.

"Modestine, of course."

"Ah!" said he. "Robert Louis Stevenson up to date! More travels with a donkey, eh?"

"Looks like being two of them now," said Richenda. Farady flinched.

"May I keep the change?" he asked. He saw the beginnings of a smile in her eyes and tried to recover lost ground. "I had no intention of listening in, you know, but since it happened that way, why not trust me with the rest of the complaint. Strangers make the best confidants, because you can tell them everything with the comfortable knowledge that you are never likely to see them again. Besides, this particular stranger is a doctor and, as you know, doctors never tell."

Richenda nodded a little cynically.

"You'll be telling me your name next—and where you live and what you do and where you're going. And after that you won't be a stranger and won't be eligible to hear a thing. So that's that, and good afternoon."

"Oh, wait a minute," said he. "Fate never threw us together with the object that we should go off in opposite directions. You don't have to be defensive with the kind of man you meet on the top of a mountain. They're always all right."

Richenda laughed.

"Don't think I'm scared of you. It's just that I came here to be alone."

Farady made a gesture towards some wet moss.

"Won't you sit down and tell me why?"

"No, sir," said Richenda, and that was the moment the storm broke loose.

There is no accounting for the storms that whirl and shout among the peaks of the Alpes Maritimes.

A giant nimbus, black as iron and heralded by a wind that clawed at the winter oaks and tossed them into space, blotted out the sun with a smother of darkness and driven snow.

Richenda plunged her hands into one of the donkey's panniers.

"Quick! My tent!"

She ignored Farady's warning cry:

"Leave it. You'll never be able . . ."

The flimsy cone of canvas was wrenched from her hands and parachuted into the valley below.

"There goes my bedroom for tonight," she wailed, as Farady dragged her into the shelter of the rock, threw a raincoat over both their heads, whipped the belt round their waists and drew it tight.

The snow heaped up on their huddled shoulders.

"Some igloo," she shouted.

"What?"

"Igloo. Esquimaux have 'em. IGLOO. Oh, what's it matter!" For he could not hear a word.

Through an unbuttoned space in the raincoat she watched the mountain-side vanish beneath a white mantle. The going-down under those conditions was going to be tricky. If the snow continued to fall until the not distant evening it might prove impossible. Twisting her eyes she saw that Farady's expression was serious.

"Where were you making for?" he yelled.

"Up over and into the valley beyond."

He shook his head, which meant that hers shook

too; for in the narrow space at their disposal they were cheek to cheek.

"You'll never do it. We must go back the way you came."

It was Richenda's turn to shake their heads.

"But it's all rocks and streams down there. Besides, I figured to be in Nice by nightfall."

"You'll never do it. These hills are treacherous going under soft snow."

"Maybe we could find a farm?"

"Isn't one. But there's a shepherd's byre in that hollow. We could make shift to spend the night there and strike the road to Nice in the morning."

Richenda stiffened.

"What sort of place is this byre?"

"Mud and stones—about six by four, but there's a roof."

"Sounds wonderful."

The wind died down to the shrill wail of violins.

"No good being choosey," said he. "We shall be lucky to get a cover over our heads."

"Darned lucky," she repeated. "And tomorrow we can return to civilisation and tell the world that platonicism is more than a dream."

He turned so sharply that a button flew and his head popped out like a tortoise.

"What kind of talk is that?"

"I'm sorry," said Richenda, and pouted rather miserably.

"I hope you are."

"I am—truly I am—only, well ever since I came to France . . ." she stopped. "Maybe, I'll tell you about it later on."

## 2.

They reached the byre as evening turned the white slopes into terraces of coral. Farady had not exaggerated the amenities of the byre, but it proved to be watertight and there was within a scattering of clean, dry grass.

Supper was quarried from their united resources, and consisted of bread, butter, a pot of *foie-gras*, some lettuce, half a cucumber, three burst tomatoes, camp coffee and a slab of bar chocolate nibbled at the edges by Richenda's teeth. It was a heartening feed and having finished it, they lit cigarettes and looked at each other with that added warmth of appreciation which food inspires.

Richenda said :

"When you're not lying in wait for damsels in distress, how do you spend your time?"

"I told you. I'm a doctor."

"Were you walking these mountains to give your patients a chance?"

"I have no patients. I've been abroad the last three years and I've just accepted the post of medical adviser to a millionaire."

"It doesn't seem a very urgent case."

"It isn't. I don't join him until tomorrow."

Richenda looked at the mountains.

"I see. Going from one high place to another."

"More or less. Tell me about you?"

She shrugged.

"I'm just travelling around with a donkey in the best Stevenson tradition."

"Rather eccentric. Was it your own idea?"

Her eyes hardened a little.

"Yes. I wanted to be alone. Father was—well, pretty busy and nobody cares to feel they are in the way."

"You're American, aren't you?"

"No, English. But I've lived in America since I was five. I'd be there still if I hadn't felt an urge to look at my own folks."

"Then you've been separated from them?"

"Aha! Since mother died father couldn't bear having me around. I lived with an aunt, but her daughters were just coming into the deb. stage and I guess I wasn't very popular around."

Farady smiled.

"I can imagine you might have cramped their style a bit."

Richenda did not reflect his smile. She looked quite grave.

"If I had belonged there it would have been different. So I thought I'd come right back to where I do belong. I hadn't seen father in fifteen years when I dropped in on him out of the blue."

"And was it a success?"

Richenda was silent for a moment. This young man possessed a powerful ability for drawing out her secrets.

"Have you ever seen a vaudeville act where the performer comes on to a sustained G? Ta-raaaa! And where the audience, in a single voice, shouts 'Get off!'? My home-coming was like that."

Farady frowned sympathetically.

"Oh, no?"

"Just like that," she repeated. "Nobody was ever such a flop as I was." She gave a little laugh, but there was no humour in it. "You see, I came home in search of something I had never had—and it wasn't there."

"What was that?"

She hesitated.

"Affection. Does that sound silly?"

"Certainly not silly," said he. "Will you tell me what you found instead?"

"A jig-saw puzzle where none of the pieces seemed to fit. Drink; gambling; love on the side, jealousies. . . . I'm not a prude, but I couldn't see any sense in it all."

"So you came to the hills to think things over?"

"Or was I sent?" she asked herself aloud. "You can't blame a man for being awkward with a daughter he hasn't seen since she was so high. He has his own interests too."

"Such as?"

"He's an architect. I—I suppose these imaginative

brains have to take a good deal to keep 'em going. Don't they?"

Farady's mouth tightened, for a drunkard was not the kind of father that he would have chosen for her.

"It's an impression some of them like to foster," he allowed, and added: "But it's tough on a girl to mean less to a man than a bottle of brandy."

Richenda said: "Don't. It's so darned disloyal of me talking this way."

"Now look here," said Farady. "I'm a stranger and as I told you up there on the hill, you can tell a stranger anything. But as a doctor I'll tell you something. Life isn't worth a thing unless there is somebody to whom you can open all doors and windows. Repression never did anybody any good. The Church of Rome accepted the truth of that and legislated for it with the confession-box. Ventilation has done a lot more for people's souls than repression ever will."

Richenda looked at him gratefully.

"Maybe you're right and maybe not, but it's comforting to talk it out of the system. I don't know anything much worse than giving affection where it isn't wanted; unless it is having it thrust upon you by somebody you don't want."

"You've had that to put up with as well?"

She nodded.

"From a man who fusses around me like a benevolent uncle. A man with a filtered voice. Flowers, presents, wanting to take me places! I don't say there's any harm in him, but oh Lordee! I want to shout: 'Let

me alone.' He sits watching me with a curled smile, and never wastes a look on that lovely, ivory wife of his. And is she lovely? It's no great wonder there's somebody else in her life. If you go to theatres you'd know who I mean. He'd stoop to rescue her handkerchief from the floor, and you'd see a shiver go through them when their fingers met. It's all so involved. The best of the bunch is the old Frenchman, for I just can't stand the Colonel. He's terrible. Coarse and with a great bull laugh. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw a grand piano. But the Frenchman is real sweet, with the manners of an angel, in spite of the fact that they've done him down. I wasn't sorry to be quit of them all and give my brain a chance to work." She stopped and rested a shut fist on one of his knees. "Were you ever in an earthquake when you felt the ground begin to tremble and wondered where you'd be in five seconds time? I had that experience in California, and it wasn't pleasant; but it was a joke to what I've felt during the last fortnight."

Farady put a hand round the shut fist and held it tight.

"Will you make me a promise?" he asked. "Let me give you my address, and if at any future time you want a friend . . ."

She would not let him go on.

"Our bargain was talk and forget. I wouldn't have let you read my signals if we hadn't been ships that pass in the night."

He released her hand sorrowfully.

"So I gain your confidence, but must lose you?"

Richenda's voice sounded rather regretful.

"I'm afraid that's how it goes."

• . . . .

The grey of dawn looked through the open doorway of the byre and faintly lit two tousled heads which lay close together. The sleepers' arms were thrown across each other with the casual gestures of insensibility. Richenda's face was half-hidden in the hollow of Farady's shoulder. A wisp of grass danced before her mouth as she breathed. As the light increased she made a little clicking noise with her tongue and opened her eyes.

For quite a while she stared in puzzlement at the brown face which almost touched her own, and at the arm which circled her protectively. She thought:

"We certainly did not start the night this way. It must have been pretty cold and we sort of—without knowing it. . . ."

Very gently, so as not to disturb him, she brushed his hair with a kiss, extricated herself from his unconscious embrace, and dragging the panniers behind her, crawled out into the sunlight. Fifty yards away Modestine was nibbling the grass philosophically.

Richenda approached.

"Modestine," she said, "you and I are going to flit quietly away. He's a real nice fellar and it seems sort of shabby to run out on him, but the truth is I talked too much last night and if I spent another day

with him there's no knowing how silly I'd be. Stand still, Modestine."

She balanced the panniers and reached down for the swinging girth.

"Now don't blow yourself out. It's better to carry a load on your back than in your heart. Hup she comes! How's that?"

She slipped the point of the strap through a loop in the buckle and turned for a final look at the byre.

"You did me a world of good, father confessor. Good-bye."

She blew a kiss and dropping her arm across Modestine's neck, went slowly down the valley.

An hour later Miles Farady woke to find himself alone.

### 3.

La Peruse, the Riviera establishment of Paul Ascherer, stood on the slopes of Rocquebrune in large and lovely grounds of its own. In spite of its size the house presented an air of modest refinement, for its owner was not only rich, but was also a connoisseur.

Miles Farady's belongings had been sent in advance and it was already dark when he arrived to take up his new duties. He was shown to his room by an English butler, Holmes, who informed him that "the Master" would not be down until cocktails were served.

"There will only be gentlemen at dinner tonight, sir. So I have put out a black tie. Have you any

preference in the matter of the temperature of the bath?"

"Hot as you like," said Farady, with an appreciative eye for the appointments of the room. On the centre table were books, drinks and three buttonholes—a gardenia, a red carnation and parma violets.

Holmes followed the direction of his eyes.

"From Mrs. Ascherer," he explained.

"Very charming," said Farady.

Holmes did a hovering gesture with his hands over a decanter.

"Whisky and soda, sir?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"Then I'll . . ."

"Just a minute, Holmes. Are we a large party?"

Holmes shook his head.

"No, sir. Quite small. Apart from the master and mistress only two other guests, beside yourself, are staying in the house. But our numbers may be increased by a young lady later in the evening. A Miss Richenda Warrant, sir."

The name meant nothing to Farady.

"I see, and who are the others?"

"Well, sir, we have Colonel Culver, who is a partner of the master's. You have not met the Colonel, sir?"

"No."

"You will, sir." There was a faint suggestion of bad news in this prophecy. "Then, sir, we have Mr. Napier Rentyen." Holmes' tone had changed.

"Rentyen the actor?"



“The actor-manager, sir. A very light-hearted and gay gentleman, sir. Has an amusing word for everybody. There will be two extra guests at dinner. Mr. Clive Warrant and the Marquis de Renanceau and de la Tour Basane.”

Farady looked up.

“Warrant, what do I remember about Warrant?”

“Mr. Warrant is one of the master’s oldest friends. You may have heard that the master has purchased Renanceau Castle and is turning it into a pleasure resort. Mr. Warrant is to be employed as the architect.”

Farady snapped his fingers.

“What an extraordinary coincidence!”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing.” His eyes strayed to the flowers on the table. “You say that Miss Warrant may be staying here tonight?”

“Yes, sir.”

Farady smiled largely.

“I shall wear a white gardenia,” he said, and whistling a cheerful air a little out of tune he vanished into the bathroom.

There was nobody in the hall when he came down half an hour later, but through an open door he caught sight of an elderly man whom he recognised as Paul Ascherer seated at a writing-table with a telephone to his ear. As no conversation appeared to be going on Farady took a step into the room and was about to speak when Ascherer laid a long white finger to his

lips and, with a smile of apology, wagged it in a gesture of dismissal.

“Sorry,” said Farady.

He retreated and entered the adjoining room, a library. At the far end stood a man with a telephone receiver held to his ear. His back was towards Farady and the most noticeable feature about him was the width of his shoulders and a heavy roll of flesh which bulged over his collar. He did not hear Farady enter for the carpet was of heavy pile which deadened the sound of footsteps.

“Hullo, hullo!” he said complainingly. “What’s the matter with you, London? I’ve been holding on for two minutes. Oh hullo, Boxall! Yes, it’s Culver speaking. Oh, you have? I see. For twenty-five thousand—Good. What premium did they ask? One and a half per cent? Hm! Well, I think that’s plenty. They are covering the risk for only another ten days. No, Ascherer never told me. I saw it in yesterday’s *Times*. All the papers had it? That so? Well it was certainly a funny thing about the watch being stolen and there have been cases of these Romanies having second sight. No, he’s fit as a flea. It’s only a crazy outside chance. You don’t mean it? Got it from Lloyds. Three thousand in premiums. I’m damned. No, I don’t want another three minutes. Boxall, keep this under your hat. It wouldn’t look too well if my name was mixed up in a gamble of this kind. You didn’t use it? Good. Bye.”

He returned the telephone to the rest, moved

towards the fireplace and stopped with a frown on seeing Farady.

"Hullo! How long have you been in the room?"

There was in the inquiry something at once hostile and anxious which Farady was swift to resent.

"I didn't time myself," he replied.

Culver gave a humourless laugh.

"Quite. Why should you? Better introduce ourselves. I'm Richard Culver. You'll be this Doctor Farady, no doubt?"

"With or without the 'this,' yes. Sorry I butted into your private talk."

Culver shrugged his shoulders and jingled some small change in his trousers pocket. His eyes focussed on the buttonhole Farady was wearing and his frown deepened.

"Nothing private. A little flutter on an outsider. Flowers in your coat, I see?"

"Yes, from Mrs. Ascherer."

Culver thumbed an undecorated lapel.

"Hm! You know each other?"

"Not yet."

"Hm!" He turned as Paul Ascherer came into the room. "You're down early tonight, Paul."

A vague gesture from Ascherer acknowledged the remark. He approached Farady with a smile on his curved lips.

"Forgive me for being engaged when you came down. Welcome to La Peruse." His voice was as soft as the wings of a dove in flight. He did not

accept the hand that Farady offered, but lowered himself into a chair and put his finger-tips together.

Farady observed that his nails were perfectly manicured and that his hands were suggestive of the work of a Japanese artist in ivory. They looked milk-white against the blue velvet of his smoking-jacket. Across the black smooth dome of his head ran a lock of white hair. He said:

“Venice, my wife, will not be joining us at dinner. You will not object, I hope, to what is so stupidly defined as a stag party.”

Farady was a little late with his “Not at all.” He was wondering if, by any chance, Paul Ascherer had been listening in to the telephone talk which he himself had overheard. In spite of the exquisite *patine* of good manners which he exhibited, he struck Farady as the sort of man who would not hesitate to busy himself with the affairs of others.

Holmes appeared at the door and announced Clive Warrant and the Marquis de Renanceau et de la Tour Basane.

The Marquis was the first to enter. He was a short man of spare build. He wore a grey Velasquez beard and had a shiny scalp like pink coral. Very stiff in all his movements, he gave the impression that the only hinge he possessed was situated in his waist. The mechanical bow he gave was characteristic of another century.

“My dear Paul!” he said, bowed and kissed his host on both cheeks. But whether it was a kiss of custom

or of betrayal Farady did not bother to ask himself, for his attention was centred on Clive Warrant.

A single glance was enough to inform Farady that Richenda's father—a man who had once been regarded as the greatest architectural genius of the age—was a little drunk. The shaggy, leonine head rocked on a pair of large, sloping shoulders. His hands were thrust into the top of his trousers, with the result that a great deal of shirt was exhibited. In lieu of a dinner-jacket he was wearing an old tweed coat, which contrasted oddly with a black silk waistcoat and the baggy dress trousers. On his feet were a pair of brown slippers in an advanced state of decay. The whole man appeared to be in a state of dereliction. His hair was unbrushed and uncut. The once classic beauty of his features was scrawled over with lines of dissipation and disillusionment. Only the fineness of the bones remained, like the ribs of a wreck stranded by the sea.

Before the war Warrant had been a man with a thousand friends, a man whose wit and brilliance was untarnished by a shade of malice. Of all that glory what remained?

Without bothering to acknowledge the greetings of his host he rolled towards a table on which cocktails had been placed and drank two in quick succession. Then in a voice that was thick and foggy he remarked:

“These would be better for a little more Pernod.”

Culver cleared his throat and said:

“Starting a new fashion in evening wear?”

Warrant did not reply, and the Colonel went on: "Any news of the wanderer? Is your daughter back yet?"

Warrant said:

"Don't know what you're talking about."

It was Ascherer who explained.

"Of Richenda, Clive. Has Richenda returned from the mountains?"

Warrant's reply more than justified, in Farady's opinion, all that Richenda had implied about him.

"Not that I'm aware."

Ascherer turned to Culver with a very slight gesture of disgust and began a rival conversation. Farady moved to Warrant's side.

"I believe I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, sir."

"Most improbable," said Warrant.

The double doors were thrown open and with a sort of arrow swiftness, Napier Rentyen entered the room. He came to a halt in the centre of the carpet with a smile which embraced the entire company. His left hand caressed a crimson carnation in the lapel of his coat.

"Am I late? No." He asked and answered. He raised the flower and dropping his head with eyes half-closed, sniffed its delicate perfume. "Marvellous! You're Doctor Farady. I'm Rentyen. How are you?" He fixed his gaze on Culver and his brows went up. "No buttonhole, Colonel? Or perhaps you don't hold with them?" Without waiting for a

reply he floated over to Ascherer's chair. "Just had a bunch of new plays by the evening post. A dud lot, I'm afraid, but if you care to glance through 'em. This is an all-man party! What tales we shall tell when the port goes round!"

Holmes announced: "Dinner is served."

4.

Paul Ascherer's voice was as soft as a caress.

"Put the brandy on the table, Holmes, then you may leave us. Yes, yes." The tips of his fingers touched the bottle, reverently. "And you may turn out the light, Holmes. Yes."

As the butler retired his hand passed over the switches and the room was plunged into a gentle darkness. Through the thin covering of smoke which hung in the air beneath the candle flames, the faces of the men who sat at the table assumed a ghostly quality.

Paul Ascherer leaned back in his chair and smiled at his guests.

"In our crowded lives," he said, "such moments as these are surely the pleasantest. A cigar, a glass of old brandy, candlelight and the companionship of friends."

Clive Warrant roused himself from a reverie, focussed a pair of bloodshot eyes upon the bottle and pointed with a forefinger which shook like totter-grass in a wind. His voice rumbled from deep down

in his chest and the words sounded like a saw biting into damp wood.

“My eyes—very troublesome, lately. Is that the original glass seal with the embossed N?”

The Marquis de Renanceau made a gesture of protest.

“Monsieur Warrant, could you ask such a question? Our host is a connoisseur.”

Paul Ascherer nodded towards him affectionately.

“You flatter me, Jean; but, as a fact, I have the history of this brandy—a stormy one, for it accompanied the Emperor during his campaign against Russia and was captured in the retreat. It would be just to say that we shall be drinking bottled history.”

Clive Warrant put out a shaky hand, but Ascherer forestalled him.

“Let me fill your glass, my dear fellow? There!”

Warrant took the bowl-shaped glass between the palms of his hands and sniffed the old, pruney bouquet of the spirit.

“Nice of you,” he said, “but I am not as drunk as you imagine.”

Into the sweet-running machinery of good fellowship the words fell like a monkey-wrench. From the Marquis came a protesting:

“Ah! La la!”

A laugh rang out from the far end of the table. Few men laughed louder or with less humour than Colonel Culver. Where other men preserved silence his brutish laughter exploded like a bomb.

Napier Rentyen jerked his head irritably. As an actor of the Modern School he detested over-emphasis of any kind. He said:

“I saw nothing very funny in Warrant’s remark. No thanks. No brandy.”

Ascherer raised his brows.

“My Napoleon.”

“Not for me, thanks.”

He pushed the bottle towards Culver, who was still chuckling.

“So you didn’t think that was funny? You won’t mind my saying that in my opinion your last play would have run a year if you had possessed a sense of humour.”

“Why should I mind what you say?”

“I happened to be a member of the syndicate.”

Rentyen nodded.

“It won’t happen again,” he promised.

Clive Warrant said:

“I think, perhaps, we are all a little drunk.”

With a wandering hand he knocked over a salt-cellar and in the spilled salt began to trace a mazy pattern.

Culver leaned towards Rentyen.

“Not our friend Rentyen. He has scarcely touched a drop. I wonder what he’s saving himself up for.”

It was both a challenge and an innuendo.

“Wonder away,” said Rentyen.

Paul Ascherer made an effort to recover the serene atmosphere which had so suddenly vanished.

"It is a privilege of friendship to squabble over nothing. Don't you agree, Farady?"

Miles Farady nodded.

He had no wish to be drawn into the conversation. He was too interested in watching the subtle transition of mood that was taking place before him. During the earlier part of the meal there had been a great show of warmth and geniality. The wine had gone round and goodwill embraced them all. It was hard to believe that a single careless phrase could bring about such swift enmities. He asked himself if Warrant's phrase was indeed responsible. Or was it the wine? Strange and various are the emotions hidden in a bottle of wine. Gaiety, love for one's fellow-men, laughter, liveliness, melancholy—despair and sudden hatred. All of them are hidden there, and each or any may suddenly pop out its head and rule the mind and the senses. This bonhomous mood which had prevailed! Was it a mask which concealed deep and unspoken bitterness?

He threw a glance at his fellow-guests to find an answer to the riddle. Clive Warrant's head was sunk upon a buckled shirt-front. His breath fogged the glass which he nursed in his hands. Paul Ascherer, silent as the Sphinx, was watching the smoke curl upward from his cigar.

From the other side of the table the Marquis nodded to Farady. It was the smallest possible nod—a mere flicker of the highlight reflected from the candles on his bald, shiny scalp. The exquisitely tonsured beard

bent a trifle as his chin dipped, and straightened as he raised it. For the Marquis was a man who held his chin high. He had not bowed his head with the swift decline of his fortunes since the war. He had accepted the passing of his seaboard property into the hands of Paul Ascherer with the same apparent indifference that he would have shown had he lost a stake at the tables. Yet for generations the Château Renanceau had looked with sombre grace over the waters of the Mediterranean, and he had told Farady with what pride of possession each generation had taken their place there. Under the ownership of Paul Ascherer the Château was to be stripped and rebuilt. It was to become the final word in modern hotels. The naked hill-side upon which it had rested like a crown since the fifteenth century was to be scarred with shops and villas, broad and narrow ways and by-ways; a funicular; a casino and flights of marble steps leading to a marble *plage*. Already Clive Warrant was at work upon the plans. Even the name Renanceau was to vanish. There was to come into being a playground—a place of luxury and entertainment—*Le Paradis sur Mer*.

Miles Farady could only guess the feelings concealed behind the delicate wrinkled features of the Marquis. It was not possible to believe that he had readily suffered the loss of so many sacred pillars and traditions. He had consented because he had no choice, and having consented he did not betray a shadow of his true emotions. His conduct towards

the man who had acquired all that he valued most was serene, courteous and almost deferential. During the earlier courses of the meal he had listened with perfect calm to Ascherer's recital of the plans that he had in mind.

"There is little doubt, *mon ami*, that you will capture the holiday trade of the world," he said.

That nod, with its faintly cynical suggestion, was the sole evidence he had given of being out of sympathy with host or fellow-guest.

Farady's attention moved on and focussed upon Rentyen. It was hard to tell when Rentyen was or was not acting. He had brought naturalness to a fine art on and off the stage. The tip of his tongue was lightly moistening his upper lip. His eyes, bright and challenging, were fixed upon Culver in a stare that was half-contemptuous. It was the first time he had seen Rentyen without a row of footlights between them, and he had not realised what a sensitive face the man possessed. He was not, in the accepted sense of the word, handsome, but sensibility had given him a rare and attractive quality of looks that was in a class far above the average. He bore himself with a light, youthful grace that made it hard to believe that he was approaching his fortieth year.

Contrasted with Rentyen, Colonel Culver was a person of very coarse fibre. Yet he was well-looking enough by certain standards. His heavy shoulders, heavy jaw and wide forehead were symbols of strength in body and purpose. It needed little imagination to

realise that he was a man with whom it would be unwise to quarrel. During the war he had earned a reputation for courage; but not of the kind to inspire love or admiration. It was the blind courage of some lower order of beast—of the bull—of the rhinoceros—a courage which prompted him to charge at anything or everything that stood in the way. Few officers had been better hated by their subordinates. His total lack of imagination as to what others felt or suffered was accountable for that. He had no understanding of human frailties. He refused to take into consideration that each man's nervous system differs from his fellows. It had been said of him that he had filled graves on both sides of the line with equal impartiality.

He emptied his glass, put a cigar between his teeth and struck a match upwards so that the flame passed within an inch of Rentyen's pale face.

"Not smoking either?" he asked, holding the match to his cigar and puffing vigorously.

Rentyen waved away the smoke with the back of a hand.

"Why should I when I'm enjoying the exhaust from your cigar?"

It was a very palpable hit and in the silence that followed the air became electric. Then Culver said:

"Perhaps you would rather join the ladies?"

"That question would come better from my host."

Paul Ascherer leaned forward smilingly.

"What do you think of this brandy, Richard?"

"I think that only a fool would refuse to drink it."

The Marquis rang a finger-nail on the rim of his glass.

"Then nobody, Monsieur le Colonel, could accuse you of being a fool."

Culver reached for the bottle.

"Anybody is welcome to try," he invited.

Rentyen folded his arms and lent back in his chair. A smile like a mischievous imp was playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Let's not start a fool hunt," said he. "We might get too large a bag. Tell me, Culver, what persuades some men to cling to their military titles sixteen years after the war? I had an idea that the rank was temporary."

Culver put down his glass so roughly that the stem snapped.

"Is that meant for me?"

"Of course, Colonel. I'm anxious to know. Do you find, as partner in the business of our host, that a military title helps you to swing the axes of finance? Or did you stick to it that lesser men may realise their inferiority?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Culver.

He had always disliked Rentyen and despised the calling which he professed, but it had never occurred to him he was a man with nerve enough to insult him openly at a dinner-table. He played with the idea of tossing the contents of his broken glass into

Rentyen's face, but decided that the brandy was too good to waste.

"A more interesting problem," he said, slowly, "is your unwillingness to drink with the rest of us. In Australia, where I come from, a man has to give his reasons for refusing a drink—or take the consequences."

"Quite a lesson in culture," Rentyen murmured.

Culver ignored the interruption.

"No doubt your reasons are excellent. Some heads are not so strong as others. I have known men, under the influence of drink, who were prone to give themselves away." He dropped his voice at the end of the sentence and pointed it by half-closing his eyes and jerking up his chin.

Rentyen's teeth shut behind a smile.

"I have known it to have even more awful results," said he. "I have known spirits to act in much the same way on a man as it does on a table-top. A very little and all the polish is gone." His eyes hardened and he held out a hand. "Would you mind detaching yourself from the bottle, Colonel? Thanks so much." He poured a liberal measure into his glass and drained it. "I hate to insult your Napoleon by drinking it in that fashion, Paul, but I cannot allow the boy friend to imagine that anybody's head could be weaker than his."

Colonel Culver laid his shut fists on the table.

"Just a ham," he said. "Just a ham."

Clive Warrant had been silent for a long time. He

spoke with an air of detachment. His eyes resting on Paul Ascherer's oriental profile.

"Surely not a ham—at *this* table?"

Ascherer did not appear to have heard, and it was the Marquis who took offence.

"Monsieur, gentlemen do not make jokes at the expense of other men's religion."

Warrant pondered his reply for a space. Then:

"I gave up being a gentleman some years ago. I found it such a lonely state."

The little Frenchman's eyes glittered.

"You may find your present and future state even more lonely."

"I ask nothing better."

"Then please to consider the susceptibilities of those who are gentlemen."

Warrant helped himself to another drink.

"Do people consider the susceptibilities of others?" he asked. "Did our Paul consider your susceptibilities when he instructed his lawyers to foreclose on Renanceau? No doubt he exhibited most charming graces, but was the blow softened on that account?"

The Marquis sucked in his breath between shut teeth.

"Monsieur, if *I* have not complained, *you* have even less reason to do so. When our host commissioned you to design and build *Le Paradis sur Mer* you were, I believe, what is called out and down."

Ascherer tapped with a finger-nail on his dessert plate.

"Jean, Jean, Jean! Clive Warrant could never be out. Let us say his genius was in suspense."

Then Culver spoke.

"For all that we know to the contrary, it still is. For weeks we've been waiting for those plans and not even a damned sketch is forthcoming."

"How forthright is our friend the Colonel," said Warrant. "So direct—so vivid. He thinks designing a township is as simple as leading a battalion in a retreat. But he does me an injustice. I have done some sketches, but whether or not they are damned I couldn't say." He put a hand in his breast-pocket and shook his head. "I meant to bring them with me tonight, but I must have left them in my villa at Nice."

Culver had risen and come to the back of Warrant's chair. His voice shook with anger.

"You said something about a retreat?"

Warrant turned and looked at him with distaste.

"A mere figure of speech."

"A figure of speech, eh? You were not suggesting that I led a retreat."

"I have neither knowledge nor interest in your past movements. But I do suggest a retreat to your own chair. I dislike craning my neck to talk to anybody."

Culver did not move. He said:

"Something worse than a crane may happen to your neck, my friend."

Paul Ascherer spoke, and his tones were more velvety than usual.

“Gentlemen, please—please. What has happened to us? Perhaps the brandy is to blame. A spirit with such a fiery record. Let me ring for a bottle of some more tranquil vintage and pledge our friendship in . . .”

Before he had finished speaking the door opened and his wife Venice came into the room.

It was the first time that Farady had seen Venice Ascherer, and she reminded him at once of a Gothic spire as, tall and slender, her small oval face poised on a long and graceful neck, and with clusters of Grecian curls worn close to her head, she stood in the pale candlelight and smiled a greeting to the company.

A half-treacherous impulse persuaded him to glance at Rentyen, but Rentyen deliberately was not looking towards the door. The third finger-tip of his right hand was travelling in circles round the rim of his brandy glass from which a thin, musical note quivered on the air.

Venice said:

“Richenda has arrived. I thought Mr. Warrant might like to know.”

But Clive Warrant gave no evidence that the news was of interest to him.

“She’ll want to unpack,” he said.

“She dressed before she left home.”

Paul Ascherer had half risen from his chair. With the news of Richenda’s arrival a look of excited eagerness had come into his face.

"Let's have her in. What do you say, Clive? Don't you think your daughter should join us?"

Warrant said:

"If she were your daughter would she be served with the brandy and cigars?"

Ascherer frowned and lowered himself in his chair. His head turned and he looked at his wife. He said:

"I have no answer to that, Clive; for Venice has not given me a daughter."

The words were barbed despite the gentle tones in which he uttered them. But Venice only said:

"Settle it among yourselves," and went from the room. Outside the closed door she drew a long breath and let it escape in a sigh.

With the knowledge that Richenda had arrived Farady found it a serious test to his patience to remain at the table. With little enough excuse he hoped that she would be just as eager to meet him as he was to meet her. He could almost have embraced Rentyen when he pushed back his chair, tossed his napkin aside and said, with rather a transparent motive:

"How about a little fresh air?"

Culver laid a hand on his arm.

"We might *all* join the ladies," he said, significantly. Rentyen flicked cigarette ash on the restraining hand and some of it was hot. Culver swore.

"Thanks for letting me go," said Rentyen.

The rest of the company had also risen, save Warrant, who had taken from his pocket a pad and

pencil and, with his nose almost resting on the paper, had begun to draw.

Ascherer laid a finger to his lips.

“An afflatus,” he whispered. “We will leave him to it.”

Clive Warrant was mumbling to himself as they went from the room.

## 5.

When Venice returned to the drawing-room Richenda was standing by an open window looking towards the bay. In the moonlight the promontory of Cap Martin was thrust like a spearhead into the dark waters of the Mediterranean. The windows of a thousand villas sparkled like jewels and the air was sweet and honeyed with the scent of orange and lemon blossom.

Venice said:

“They will join us presently. Paul is giving a bachelor party.”

Richenda nodded.

“I hope they won’t hurry because of me. How lovely your house is—like a dream. Nothing could be more perfect than this bay at night.”

Venice said:

“I suppose it’s lovely. I am from a flat country—Norfolk. Rocks and mountains mean very little to me. Give me fields that steam in the evening—marshes—reeds—and wild birds that look black against the sky. I have very simple tastes, really.”

Richenda thought:

"Yet the gown she is wearing and those jewels must have cost—well, anything."

Venice went on:

"Your father left you a note, I suppose, asking you to join us here?"

"No. There was a letter waiting for me from Mr. Ascherer. Father is rather forgetful when he's working. It was nice of you to ask me to stay."

"You must tell Paul that. It will please him. He likes to have young people around."

Richenda looked up, interrogatively, and Venice smiled.

"No, no. Not in that way. Paul's greatest disappointment is having no child of his own. That's a reproach to me, isn't it?" She did not wait for a reply, but put another question. "Haven't you been away somewhere?"

"Yes. I took a donkey and went for a hike through the mountains."

"Really? Alone?"

"Of course. That was the whole idea."

"Everyone to their choice," said Venice. "I've not much use for solitude. It makes one think."

"I wanted to think."

"Did you succeed?"

"Not too well."

Venice put an arm round her.

"Aren't you rather young to find life puzzling?"

"The whole of my life has been a puzzle, but I won't bore you with that."

"I shouldn't be bored."

"I've never known where I stood."

"How?"

"Things went wrong when I was about five. I don't think my father and mother got on too well. There were quarrels. I was supposed to be too young to realise that. But when separation is in the air a child always winds it. Then my mother died and I was sent to America to live with an aunt."

"I see. And then your father sent for you to join him?"

"No. He seemed to lose all interest in me. I came of my own free will to find out why."

She stopped and looked at Venice with a frown.

"I can't think what's come over me lately."

"In what way?"

"I don't seem able to keep anything to myself. I'm always talking about myself and I despise people who do that."

"Then I'm not the only one you've told?"

"No. I told most of it to a stranger. Not that it matters. I shan't see him again." She lifted her head at the sound of men's voices. "Here they come!"

Venice said:

"I shall leave you to entertain them."

She went through the windows on to the terrace as the men came into the room. Culver was the first to enter. He waved his cigar by way of greeting.

"Well, well! Worn off the soles of your boots, I suppose?"

"More or less."

Paul Ascherer came forward and took both her hands, kissing each in turn.

"My very dear Richenda."

"It was so nice of you . . ." she began, raised her eyes and stopped with a gasp of astonishment.

Miles Farady in the doorway saluted her with a quick smile.

Ascherer looked from one to the other and saw the added colour which had mounted into Richenda's cheeks.

"You know each other?"

Richenda said nothing and Miles replied.

"But not by name. Our ways happened to cross in the mountains and we sheltered from a storm together."

"Then I must introduce you. This is Dr. Farady, my medical attendant—Miss Richenda Warrant."

Richenda did not take the hand that Farady offered her. She felt, with little reason, that in being present he was guilty of betraying her confidence. She said:

"I must find my father," and went quickly from the room. But she did not go at once in search of him. She went first to her own room, where she stood by the window wondering if, after all, she was not rather glad to have a friend of her own generation in the house. She thought:

"I will be nice to him."

Farady meanwhile suffered feelings of the liveliest disappointment.

In the dining-room Holmes, with two footmen in support, addressed Clive Warrant politely.

"Would it disturb you if we took away the table appointments, sir?"

He had to repeat the question before Warrant roused himself to answer:

"It wouldn't disturb me if you took away the whole house and everybody in it."

Beneath his pencil a crazy sketch was appearing of some kind of villa clinging like a fly to the side of a precipice.

As Holmes and the footmen went out bearing trays, Richenda passed them coming in.

"Father?"

"H'm!" He did not look up.

"It isn't very kind of you to ignore me."

The uneasy way he rolled his shoulders was evidence that he had no wish for her company.

"My dear girl, I'm too tired and too busy to start one of these vague, reproachful discussions. There are plenty of people here who don't ignore you. Why not give one of them a treat?"

There was nothing to encourage Richenda to draw up a chair beside him, but she did.

"You do dislike me, don't you?"

"Dislike? Why should I? I hardly know you."

"Whose fault is that?"

"And now we are becoming academic. Mine—your mother's—yours? What the devil does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

"You were all right in America. Why didn't you stay there? Stupid to come home."

"I certainly haven't found a home," said Richenda.

He turned his head and looked at her. A sort of rheum, that might have been tears, had gathered in his eyes.

"What a sad little thing to say."

Richenda shut her hands.

"If you laugh at me," she began.

"I'm not. I suppose it's too long ago for you to remember, but there was a time when I loved you very dearly."

"I haven't forgotten. I want to know what's become of that love."

Warrant clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"That is one of the greatest mysteries of life. What does become of the love that burnt so brightly yesterday? Dust and ashes. Our common tragedy lies in the words: 'I had and I have lost.' Try not to feel ill-will towards me, Richenda. With your sweet looks love can be had for the asking."

She said:

"I'm asking for love from you."

He shook his head.

"No. I hate to disappoint you, but no. There are only two loves in my life. One is for myself, and

the other for an idea." A queer look came into his face and he dropped his voice to a whisper. "It's a good idea—brilliant, and the best thing about it is that nobody but myself will ever know that it existed. Shared with anybody else it would be senseless, no use whatever, but as a closely guarded secret . . ." He broke off and scowled. "There was some brandy here. Where is it? Don't say those fellows . . ."

"Right before you." Richenda pointed. "But the bottle is empty."

Warrant rubbed his forehead perplexedly.

"My eyes! They are playing me the strangest tricks. Things seem to come and go—mostly go. Objects looming up and disappearing as in a fog."

"You should see an optometrist."

"My God, what a word. Oculist."

"Whichever you like, but see one."

Richenda looked at the empty bottle and glass and the ash-tray laden with cigarette ends.

"Father," she said, "you say you have a good idea. Well, I have a better. Quit pandering to yourself. Cut out the drink and the smoking. Stop acting like one of these wounded pigeons you find in the rocks. Try being a man again."

Clive Warrant struggled unsteadily to his feet.

"Who presumes to say I drink too much?"

"Oh my dear," cried Richenda, "why you can scarcely stand."

He slumped back into his chair and pressed his fingers to his temples.

"I can think better sitting down. You have no right to speak to me—now or ever. You have sacrificed—the—the right. Kindly leave me—alone."

Richenda's reply was barely audible.

"Very well."

She had reached the door when his voice arrested her. "And tell one of the servants let me have s'm brandy."

Richenda went out biting her lower lip.

## 6.

Colonel Culver sneered as Rentyen passed him at the window and went on to the terrace.

"I thought you wouldn't be long doing that," he said. "You will probably find her in the pavilion at the foot of those steps."

Rentyen gave a light laugh.

"What a joke if they had had you in the Intelligence Department," he said.

Culver took a quick step on to the terrace and thrust his face close to Rentyen's.

"I've had about enough of you."

"It's mutual, Colonel. If you would like to try and remove me, I am perfectly willing. This is foreign soil."

"Cah! You damned play-actor!"

Rentyen shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if I must convince you of my sincerity!"

It was pure accident that Farady saw the blow

struck. The back of Rentyen's hand, with the fingers extended, impacted stingingly against Culver's cheek. As Culver recoiled, his mouth wide open with amazement, Rentyen walked lightly past him to the head of the steps.

Farady heard Culver cry out:  
"Come back."

"The morning will be soon enough," was the reply, and Rentyen went down the steps.

In the little marble pavilion behind a peristyle of Corinthian columns, Venice Ascherer waited. Against the darkness of the interior she looked like a ribbon of moonlight. She had no doubt that Napier Rentyen would come to her, for he had a gift of divining her whereabouts. The other guests would possibly have missed the subtle reproach in her husband's voice when he said, "Venice has given me no daughter." But Napier would not have missed it. His sensibilities were attuned to subtle inflexions and suggestions. It was that, from her viewpoint, which made him the perfect companion. She wondered to what nature of performance she would be treated when he arrived. He might be in any of so many moods. Angry—ardent—full of rash proposals—or utterly vague and remote. It was impossible to foretell.

It had been a daring experiment to have him stay in the house as a guest; for he was a man with little control of his emotions and temper. In that respect the contrast between himself and Paul could not have been sharper. In Paul there was never any change.

No matter what tempests raged around him, he rode always in some smooth backwater of his own. Tears and scenes left him unruffled, unmoved and detached. The emotions of his fellow-men and women were powerless to arouse in him any visible response.

Rentyen was the answer to any woman's prayer, who had the misfortune to be married to such a man as Paul.

Venice looked up with a smile of welcome as he came down the steps. She had always accused him of walking like a game-cock, and on this night, more than ever before, his step conveyed that impression of gameness, of a darting activity of body and mind. There was something challenging in the tilt of his head, his twitching smile and the glint in his grey, restless eyes. He looked, she decided, both angry and pleased with himself. She knew, then, that she would not be bored.

He came to her side, and stooping, kissed her on the forehead.

"I had a little sister," he said, "and once every spring she would clap her hands and exclaim 'Aren't the primroses lovely!' I always want to say that when I look at you."

Venice smiled and her eyes searched the air above his head.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"The gnat you were straining after."

"Ah come! that isn't fair," said he. "I mean these things."

"Never mind if you mean them or not. You take a lot of trouble to think of them—and I'm grateful and pleased. Was the party a pleasant one?"

"It was hell."

"You've been quarrelling, Faun?" for Faun was her private name for him.

"Culver needed a lesson—and got it."

"What happened?"

"I hit him in the mouth." He rubbed his knuckles against the lapel of his coat.

"He stood for that?"

"He had no choice. You know, of course, that he's in love with you?"

"That's absurd." But there was little conviction in her tone.

"Of course you know it," he repeated.

"He has never said so."

"He never will. He's afraid. All bullies are cowards. Colonel Culver! He makes me see red."

"You're a strange one, Faun."

"I am? Why?" His love for her did not prevent him relishing a discussion about himself.

"Strange and inconsistent. You hate Paul because he doesn't love me—and you hate Culver because he does. Where's the sense in that?"

Rentyen lit a cigarette.

"Feelings can't be ruled by logic, Venice. Paul is a dog in the manger, and Culver a kind of King Kong—yammering for a mate, but without the pluck to take

her. To hell with the pair of them! How much longer am I to wait for you, Venice?"

She rested her cheek against his.

"Faun, what's the use? Paul is too strong for us."

"I deny that."

"But it's true. You're an infant when it comes to business. Imagine where you'd be if he stopped backing your theatre?"

He sprang to his feet.

"If you want to insult me you couldn't have chosen a better way."

His back was to her and he did not see her slow smile.

Venice was thinking: "Now the entertainment will begin." She did not love him the less because he could not fail to seize any opportunity for making a dramatic effect. Rentyen was an actor on and off the stage, but, to him, living and acting were synonymous. She said:

"I know you so well, my darling. There is no more brilliant actor—but there it ends. A successful theatre doesn't depend on personality alone. Paul has a flair for knowing what the public wants. Have you forgotten the muddle there was before he took control?"

"It isn't impossible to find other backers."

"But what use would they be? As before, you would overrule them in everything. Nobody but Paul has ever been able to lead you."

He tossed his head and addressed the stars.

"And we two are supposed to be in love!"

"I do love you."

"Is that why you talk business in the moonlight?"

Venice said:

"I wouldn't love you as well as I do if I were willing to give you failure."

His mouth began to twitch at the corners. Failure was a word he could not bear to hear in relation to himself. For ten years he had enjoyed unbroken success and he would not share the credit for that with any man.

"Every woman treats her lover as a child," he said bitterly. "I should have thought I had done well enough to merit a little of your trust. It seems I was wrong. It seems that my trivial successes were dependent upon this husband of yours. Well, you are very sane, my dear; perhaps a little too sane. It was sanity no doubt that persuaded you to marry him in the first instance. No doubt you think that neither of us could get along without his godlike direction and judgment. Well, we must see if you are right about that. Yes—we must *see*." His eyes blazed dangerously in the moonlight. "We must *see*."

Venice thought:

"How adorable he is! Like an angry, petulant boy. I wonder how deeply he is feeling any of this. He is handling the scene beautifully—and knows it. Perhaps he will work something like this into his next production."

She would have liked to have drawn him down

on to her lap and cradled him against her breast, but that would have been a *faux tirage*. He would expect her to play in tune. Aloud she said:

“I am trying to do what’s best for you. Isn’t it rather cruel to speak that way to me—to lose your temper?”

“Have I lost my temper? I didn’t know it?”

“It’s so foolish to be angry.”

“But emotions are foolish—and since I am full of emotions, naturally I become a fool. I’m sorry to have hurt you. I’m sorry I haven’t Paul’s gift for masking what I feel. Another night in this house is about all I shall be able to stand.”

He strode to the foot of the steps and swung round as if he had something to add.

“No, it doesn’t matter, but if anything should happen . . .” He went up the steps at a run.

“He may not have been acting,” Venice thought, “he *may* not.” But she did not mind in the least, either way.

## 7.

Miles Farady’s search for Richenda was unsuccessful, for after the interview with her father she had gone back to her room. He felt that she had been rather less than fair in treating him with such studied coldness. He was not to blame for having inspired her to empty her heart in that lonely byre up in the mountains. She had done so of her own free will and he could not

reproach himself for the accident which had brought them together again. For his own part nothing could have delighted him more and he longed to carry her off to some quiet corner for a talk. Now that he had made contact with the company from which she had voluntarily fled there was so much that he wanted to discuss with her. In the course of a life which had not been lacking in experience he had never before found himself confronted by so many warring factions. He felt that the whole house was like a mine which might explode in any of half a dozen directions. It was a house of hatred and discord. The one person who seemed at ease was his patient, Paul Ascherer.

A silent watcher at the dining-table he had felt a growing admiration for Ascherer's conduct and behaviour. In that disgruntled company he and the Marquis alone had preserved any vestige of dignity. But whereas Miles had felt that the Marquis was imposing upon himself a most vigilant restraint, he had no such feeling in regard to Ascherer. Throughout the bickering and affronts which were hurled across the table Ascherer had appeared perfectly relaxed and indifferent. Farady did not doubt that here was no ordinary man. He seemed to belong to some older and wiser race and generation than the rest of his guests. Everything about him bore evidence of fineness. His sculptured features—his pale ivory hands—his long-lashed lavender-coloured eyes and the exquisitely modulated tones in which he spoke.

Richenda had referred to his "filtered voice," and it could hardly have been better defined.

Farady was passing through the hall when the door of Ascherer's study opened and the filtered voice invited him to come in.

"If you are not tired, Dr. Farady; not too tired to do a little work."

"I never felt less tired."

Paul Ascherer closed the door behind them and taking off his coat and waistcoat he laid them on a chair. He said:

"Since I am to become your patient I feel that you have a right to know all that there is to know about me. In other words to see for yourself what you are taking on."

Farady smiled.

"You want me to give you the once over."

"Exactly. I do not think you will find that there is much the matter with the machine, but that is an opinion upon which I shall be glad of your endorsement. You would like me to remove my shirt."

"Please. I'll get my instruments and . . ."

Ascherer checked him with a gesture.

"There is no need. They are here already." He pointed to a bag on the writing-table. "Forestalling the inevitable, you see. Don't hesitate to ask anything you want to know."

Farady looked at the stripped figure before him and nodded approvingly. He had seldom seen a man of finer physique. Despite his fifty years Paul Ascherer

had the body of an athlete. The clearly articulated muscles, the wide arched thorax and firm, white skin testified to a state of health that a younger man might have envied.

"At a glance," said Farady, "I can't help wondering why you waste your money on a permanent medical attendant."

"I'm afraid my reply may sound to you rather trivial. Sheer superstition. I am no hypochondriac. I suffer from no morbid depression of mind or spirit. I am, to the best of my belief, exceptionally healthy. But I *am* superstitious. I am prepared to believe that the stars in their courses influence our mortal actions. I also believe, with very slender evidence to support the belief, that certain persons have the power to divine the triumphs and disasters that await their fellow-men."

Farady looked sceptical.

"If you want me to cure you of superstition . . ." he began.

Ascherer waved a hand.

"Banish the thought. In a material world I should be the last person to want to be ridded of what little mysticism may still be found. Your job will be to circumvent any misadventure that seems likely to befall me. A month ago, Farady, I was on a racecourse and was addressed by a quaint, Rembrandtesque gipsy who wished to tell my fortune. I was talking at the time and waved her away. As a result the creature fell to abuse. I did not pay much heed to what she

was saying, but her last few words have remained with me rather disturbingly. She said: 'Just as surely as your gold watch will be stolen this day, so, in the month of February, will you die in bed.'"

Farady gave a short laugh.

"You put your hand in your pocket, I suppose, and found your watch was gone. I also suppose that the gipsy had it."

Paul Ascherer shook his head.

"Would not the average thief be more reticent than that? As a matter of fact my watch was still there. It was stolen at eleven-thirty that night as I walked through a theatre crowd in the West End of London."

Farady gave an involuntary exclamation, for the reference to the watch had reminded him of the telephone conversation in the library and of Colonel Culver's obvious embarrassment at having been overheard.

"What a funny coincidence," he said.

"Let us hope it was no more than that. And now, if you are ready, shall we begin?"

Ten minutes later Farady said:

"Heart, lungs, liver and arteries sound as a bell. Your gipsy was referring to some future February—about twenty years from now."

Ascherer picked up his shirt and began to dress. He evinced no satisfaction at being passed fit, and when next he spoke there was a shade of melancholy in his voice.

"Thank you, Doctor. You overhauled me with

admirable thoroughness. I do not fear death, on the other hand I have a special reason for wishing to live as long as possible."

"Naturally. You are a busy man."

"Not for reasons of business. I have outlived any thrills to be found in that direction. I shall work on, for to me work is a second nature. It is for an experience that I have not enjoyed that I am anxious to prolong life."

"Are there any experiences you haven't enjoyed?"

"There is one—possibly the greatest that life has to offer. Parenthood."

Farady hardly knew what to make of that. It seemed to him that his patient had left it rather late to turn his thoughts to night-lights and a nursery, nor had the little he had seen of his hostess encouraged the belief that her thoughts followed that direction. The one remark Ascherer had addressed to her about having no daughter would hardly have been made had any reasonable hopes of a "blessed event" been entertained by him. To Farady's knowledge the two had been married for ten childless years. Yet Ascherer was not a man to have spoken of parenthood with such a depth of feeling unless he had some motive for doing so. In the circumstances Farady felt that silence would be the wisest course. He was putting away his instruments when Ascherer spoke again.

"I am afraid your introduction here was an uncomfortable one, Doctor. You will have observed that my guests were, shall I say, a little out of sympathy."

Farady nodded.

"I should have thought that was putting it lightly. I never saw men with more hatred for each other."

"Not for each other, Doctor, but for me. Oh, I assure you, and I never allow myself to be deceived. But for my presence the party would have been most harmonious. There was not a man at that table, with the probable exception of yourself, who would not gladly see me die. Don't shake your head. It's true. Nobody is more universally hated than I am. In the circumstances can you wonder if I crave a little real affection from, let us say, a child of my own."

Before Farady had time to reply, the door opened and Colonel Culver came into the room.

"Busy?" he asked, with a scowl at Farady, which was a clear invitation to him to get out.

"No. Come in. The Doctor has been running over me with a tape."

"Well, if he has done . . ."

Ascherer nodded.

"He has, and now I hope he will join us in a cigar."

But this proposal was not to Culver's liking.

"Can't we be alone?"

"We could, if I desired it, but, for the future, Doctor Farady and myself will be much united. Well, now, what is it all about?"

Colonel Culver dropped sulkily into a chair.

"I'm fed up. Fed to the back teeth. I want to be shut of the whole business."

"Of our business?"

"I don't say that. It's this *Paradis sur Mer* that's sticking in my throat. In my opinion it's chucking millions of francs down a drain. I've made my money in a hard school and I've no intention of parting with it."

Ascherer said:

"I suppose I might be referred to as a hard school, but let that pass. What have you against the scheme?"

"It's too damned fantastic. And where's the security? With the franc standing at about seventy to the pound, France as a holiday resort is deader than mutton."

"I wouldn't presume to question your authority on mutton, Richard, your youth having been spent in Australia, but in the matter of entertaining the masses I have not been entirely unsuccessful. However, if you wish to withdraw, now is undoubtedly the time. There will be no difficulty in disposing of your interest."

Culver's head slugged from side to side. Nothing exasperated him more than his partner's urbanity when he himself was rattled.

"Look at the thing from a practical point of view? How can it possibly work? When the damned place is built the only chance of making it pay will be to ask prohibitive prices which the man of moderate means couldn't look at."

"My dear Richard, how right you are. The man of moderate means won't be asked to look at them.

*Paradis sur Mer* will demand so much from its visitors that only the wealthiest will be able to enjoy its amenities. I hope to make it as difficult to enter as that other paradise about which we were taught as children."

Culver grunted.

"Rubbish! A dream! Where are such people to be found?"

"I shall find them, never fear. There is always a buyer for what is expensive enough. It is the cheap article that is hard to sell, for the reason that the buyer of cheap articles wants to get his money's worth. Your rich man seldom gets his money's worth. He gets, instead, a sense of exclusive ownership; the *caché* of doing or possessing what the less fortunate look at with jealous amazement. I acquired that knowledge early in life." He turned to include Farady in what he was saying. "I began my career in the East End of London with a capital of fifteen pounds. An opportunity was presented for buying some furs which had been smuggled through the docks by a sailor. I had the choice of an imposing musquash coat and a very modest stole in Russian sable. Unhesitatingly I bought the latter. The coat, no doubt, I could have disposed of for a reasonable profit to some furrier in the Mile End Road; but I aimed higher. I went to Mayfair on an omnibus. I called upon a peeress of the realm. I told her that the sables were stolen property and I have no doubt she believed that I was the thief. But did that discourage her?

Not at all. She gave me a cheque for fifty pounds and a glass of dry sherry. No, my dear Richard, you need not fear that we shall fail to find customers who are ready enough to squander their money at *Paradis sur Mer.*"

But Culver was a restless listener.

"I don't like it," he insisted. "I like nothing about it. And least of all do I like having commissioned a drunken sot like Warrant to build the place. At the rate we're going he'll be ten years over the job."

"At the rate he's going he'll be in the grave long before that. But delay is a risk I am prepared to take; Clive is a great artist, and art is something you have never learned to appreciate. Without his genius for design our Paradise would become a vulgar little hell."

"There are plenty of architects in the world."

"I agree. There are altogether too many."

"I can't see that a lot of flapdoodle is going to make so much difference."

"You wouldn't. No doubt you would be satisfied to plan the town on the lines of Southend-on-Sea. But I have other views."

"They are not practical."

"No—they are visionary. Let's not discuss it further. You have cold feet. Very well. Get out—retire—I'm not stopping you."

Culver struggled out of his chair.

"Nobody accuses me of cold feet."

"You are wrong. I have already done so. You

have been afraid to give me your real reasons for wanting to withdraw from the scheme."

Culver's cheeks flamed a dark crimson.

"I have given half a dozen reasons."

"But not the real one. Well, you can save yourself the trouble. I know it."

"What do you mean?"

It was a dangerous question, for Ascherer was not a man to be bluffed or bullied into keeping silence.

"Do you seriously ask me that?"

"I—yes—I do."

"Very well, Richard. It is not in your nature to endure the sight of another man having the courage to succeed where your own lack of courage has made success an impossibility."

"All this talk about courage is Greek to me," Culver blustered.

The smile on Ascherer's face seemed to have become frozen. He said:

"I suppose, on a sheep-farm, classical educations are rare. Nevertheless you do understand."

Like boxers sparring for an opening the two men watched each other's eyes. But whereas Culver shifted from foot to foot and breathed heavily, Ascherer was dangerously still and smiling.

"Not a word," said Culver. "There's nothing to understand." And he swung round to the door.

The gentle voice stopped him as he reached for the handle.

"There is this to understand, Richard. Had you succeeded—or had you even so much as made a bold attempt to succeed, I would have broken you, even if it cost me a million to do it."

"I say again I don't know what you mean."

But Farady detected a note of fear in his voice.

Ascherer did not offer further enlightenment. All he said was:

"To avoid being made ridiculous by a man like you would be worth a million, Richard. I see you have cut your lip. Perhaps the Doctor, here, would give you a healing ointment."

The door slammed, and Ascherer addressed Farady.

"Was that equally Greek to you, Doctor?"

It was not, for Farady had seen what had taken place between Culver and Rentyen on the terrace. It did not need much imagination to guess that jealousy was at the back of it. Nevertheless he took a risk in replying:

"No. But you might have spared him the humiliation of saying what you did before an audience."

Ascherer nodded.

"I dare say that would be the conventional view. But, you see, I do not believe in giving quarter."

Farady picked up his bag.

"Well, it is no affair of mine."

"But it might become your affair. During the war Culver had quite a reputation for attacking in the dark."

Farady laughed and went to the door. But the

laugh stopped as once again he remembered Culver's talk at the telephone.

"I had forgotten the gipsy's warning," he said.

There was no humour in Ascherer's reply.

"So soon? That's disappointing. I hope you won't forget more than you can help. A good memory is a safeguard. I dare say you will find some bridge in the drawing-room if you're interested."

As Farady crossed the hall he wondered half aloud:

"What the devil was the idea of that call? Taking a gamble, he said."

Was Colonel Culver gambling on the life of his partner?

## 8.

When Culver left his partner's study he passed through the hall and went into the garden. Through a gap in the curtains of the dining-room window he had a glimpse of Warrant, pencil in hand and with a brandy bottle and a number of candlesticks forming a half circle before him. Warrant's head was resting on the table and to all appearances he was asleep. Resisting an inclination to enter and wake him up, Culver moved on down an avenue of dwarf mimosa trees to a seat beside a pool, where water splashed merrily from a fountain.

Biting off the end of a fresh cigar he struck a match with a shaking hand. So violently did his hand shake that three matches were extinguished before the cigar

was properly alight. It was not often that Culver displayed such obvious symptoms of agitation and he defended himself by a pretence that anger was the cause. But it was a pretence that carried little conviction, for in his secret heart he knew that he was afraid.

It had not occurred to him that his telephone talk to London had been overheard. His fear was inspired by the knowledge that Ascherer had divined the truth about his love for Venice, a truth which he had tried to conceal even from himself. From his first meeting with Venice he had been stirred and shaken by desire. Fear of, or, as he preferred to regard it, loyalty to Ascherer had prevented him from making even the most trivial advances towards her. It was rare indeed for him to go so far as an offer to shake hands. Yet every moment spent in her company had increased his undeclared need for her. In his empty soul spaces, she reigned supreme. Together, in the loneliness of the night, she shared with him a phantom lust. Utterly material in all else, he had built up and devised a secret and bodily partnership between them. The fact that she had never betrayed the remotest liking for, or interest in him did not destroy the imaginary intimacy which was theirs. He invented and whispered to himself clumsy endearments, pretending that it was she who uttered them. Sometimes, in their dream relationship he was rough and brutal; cursing at or striking her. Sometimes he would watch, moistening his heavy lips, her white flesh change from red to a

sullen purple where his blows had fallen. Night after night her phantom head lay willingly on the thick of his arm, and in the dark her warm breath fanned his cheek. Yet, in the five years he had known her, not one word of love had he dared to utter.

He knew well enough that her marriage to Paul Ascherer was no more than a name, and from this knowledge he drew a vicarious satisfaction. If she could not be his it was some compensation to know that she gave herself to no other man. While that state of continence prevailed he could still be silent and satisfy himself with an imaginary intimacy which had for its counterpart the sexual phobia of a film fan adoring in private, and from afar, some person there was no shadow of hope that he or she would ever meet in the flesh.

It was the appearance of Rentyen upon the scene which had upset everything. Rentyen's insolent evidence of love for Venice. And Venice's no less obvious interest in him. Rentyen buying her flowers—squirting her—rendering a thousand loverlike services. Venice holding the flowers to her cheek—smiling her gratitude—giving him her hand—her eyes—and what more?

“What more?” Culver sprang to his feet with fists clenched. “What more?”

Through the perfumed silence of the garden the words rang out like pistol shots. From the terrace above Rentyen heard and turned to Richenda with a word of apology.

"Will you excuse me? Here's Farady! He will be better company than I am."

He moved away swiftly in the direction from which the sound had come.

Culver cursed himself for lack of control. He thought:

"Paul meant what he said. He would smash me. He's done it to others—to that Frenchman. I was a fool to have given myself away. He has second sight, blast him!" He rubbed his face and found that the sweat of fear was upon it. For the future he would have to watch every step. Already Paul might have set about that subtle undermining of his share holdings. Markets were treacherous enough without the treachery of men to add to their risks. He thought: "From now on I shall never know where I stand." He thought: "Sell out of the Ascherer group and get out." But that would be too risky. Then he remembered the gipsy's prophecy and uttered what was half a prayer that it might come true.

There were two interests in Culver's life—money and Venice. The money he had—Venice he was never likely to have. It would be mad to sacrifice the substance for a shadow—a will-o'-the-wisp. But if Ascherer were out of the way. . . . If the coast were clear. . . .

He shook his head.

"I must go slow," he said aloud, "go cannily."

A voice, Rentyen's, inquired:

"Planning a new campaign, Colonel?"

Culver started and swung round. On the soft grass borders Rentyen's approach had been soundless. He stood, hand on his hip, nibbling a finger-nail, smiling provocatively.

Culver said:

"You'll clear out if you know what's good for you."

But apparently Rentyen did not know what was good for him. He said:

"More correctly I should have asked my seconds to call on you, but I hardly knew whom to nominate. Well, which do you fancy, Colonel, swords or heavy artillery?"

Culver gaped. It did not seem possible that Rentyen was in earnest about fighting a duel, yet he presented every appearance of sincerity.

"Keep your humour for those who like it," he growled.

"I thought you said I had no sense of humour. Not that it's important at the moment. But I should like an answer to my question."

"I have something better to do than listen to a lot of rot."

"My dear Colonel, rot is no way to describe an affair of honour."

"Aah . . .!"

Rentyen clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"Am I to translate that expression as the crude preliminary to another retreat?"

Culver exhibited a shut fist.

“Look here, Rentyen, you better take care.”

“The taking care seems to be all on your side. I am here to offer you the satisfaction a gentleman has a right to expect. If you prefer not to fight me don’t be surprised if I pin a white feather to your hat—in public.”

It would have been so simple to have picked him up and slung him in the pond, but what had happened in the study warned Culver to beware. Rentyen was a talker. It would not be possible to rely upon his discretion to withhold the cause of the quarrel. And even if he said nothing Ascherer would guess the truth. But the alternative—this absurd challenge to fight a duel would, if accepted, advertise the truth even more blatantly. Rentyen was news. He would fight no duel that did not appear on the world’s front pages. And Paul Ascherer had said that it would be worth a million not to be made ridiculous. There was only one safe course—to climb down—to pass the thing off as a joke. Thus, with a savage desire to smash his fist into Rentyen’s insolent face, Culver gave vent to one of his great joyless laughs.

Rentyen’s eyebrows soared.

“What’s so funny, Colonel?”

Culver threw out a hand and slapped him on the shoulder.

“I said you had no sense of humour and I was right. What a fellar you are for taking things seriously! Can’t you see that I’ve been pulling your leg ever

since we sat down to dinner. Come on! Snap out of it! Let's go up to the house and have a drink."

But Rentyen did not move. He said:

"Who would have thought beneath that rugged exterior there beats such a timid heart! All the same I won't have a drink. Toddle along and have one by yourself."

The position was intolerable, but had to be borne, for altogether too much was at stake. With a mighty effort Culver swallowed his pride, shrugged his great shoulders and marched off with a chuckle which was, in fact, a gibber of fury. He had barely gone a dozen paces when Rentyen launched a sudden and very startling "Boo!"

So great was Culver's surprise that he almost leapt into the air.

"Bloody fool!" he exploded.

"Pleasant dreams, Colonel," said Rentyen, sweetly.

## 9.

Richenda said:

"I suppose, as we are stopping in the same house, I may as well be civil to you."

It was not a gracious speech, but since he had come to La Peruse, Miles Farady had noticed that gracious speeches were more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

"There's no compulsion," he replied. "I would

rather you were civil because there is no reason for being anything else."

"I'm not going to argue," said Richenda. "And if you want to be forgiven for stealing my confidence and betraying it by turning up again, you had better try and be nice for a change."

He laughed at that—or at the way she said it—or at the feminine slant of mind which has an infallible gift for putting a man in the wrong.

"And so I will," he said. "And, really I am very sorry to have behaved so disgracefully. If I had been any sort of a chap I ought to have jumped off a cliff. But the odds against our meeting again were rather long."

Richenda tipped up her chin and stared at the moon.

"That's not a very gallant speech. If I were a man and I liked a girl, I would take darned good care that I saw her again, whatever the odds. I wouldn't apologise for doing it."

So there it was again! Farady took his head in his hands.

"Do you speak Swahili?" he asked.

"I don't. Why? Do you?"

"No. I wish I did. Then you wouldn't be able to tell if what I was saying was right or wrong."

She smiled and rested her fingers on his arm for a second. Right through his coat he felt a thrill.

"You're not a bad sort. But a girl hates to give herself away—herself and a lot of others."

“But I have forgotten everything you said.”

Richenda shook her head.

“Forgotten nothing—when you’ve seen it all for yourself. Let’s find some place to sit.”

They found a marble seat.

“Sort of strikes cold,” said Richenda.

“Get up and I’ll give you my coat to sit on.”

“And how will you explain the creases afterwards? A handkerchief will do, if you have one.”

He gave her his handkerchief and she looked at the monogram in the corner.

“What does the M stand for?”

“Miles.”

Richenda repeated:

“Miles—Miles Farady. It’s a silly sort of name when you come to say it over.”

“I suppose it is,” he agreed. “But unlike you, I shall never have the chance to change it for another.”

Richenda opened her eyes wide.

“I must say it’s very civil to ask me to marry you on our second meeting.”

“I didn’t,” he hastened to assure her.

“Oh dear! That is a disappointment.”

Miles leant back in the seat and looked at her. She was wearing a low-cut fawn-coloured frock which melted into the tarnished silver of the moonlight. The moonlight had traced a silvery fillet round her head and profile. On the short, inviting upper lip it gleamed like a tiny pool. He had not realised before how very lovely she was.

"Though why I didn't ask you I can't imagine," said he. "Richenda, why don't we?"

"Don't we what?"

"Get married? I think you're grand. And I'm not so bad when you get to know me."

"Well, isn't that wonderful?"

He saw laughter beginning to play in her eyes.

"It would be wonderful."

He talked lightly, but his pulses had begun to throb.

"Aren't you having fun?"

"I don't know that I am. I wouldn't say that I'm not terribly in earnest about this. A minute ago I wasn't, but I seem to have changed inside. I haven't done much falling in love before, but I see no reason why it shouldn't happen this way."

Richenda said:

"Don't stop. I'm having a lovely time."

"But I'm not. I'm beginning to feel anxious—terribly."

Richenda began to laugh to herself. It sounded like the cheerful notes of a little silver bell. When she had finished laughing she put out a hand and ruffled his hair.

"Idiot!" she said. "Aren't you the dearest idiot? Oh, Miles, darling, you don't know what a lot of good you've done me. I was feeling awful until you thought of all that nonsense."

"I refuse to be treated like a doctor."

"But you've been such a good doctor. You wouldn't believe how good. Will you promise me something?"

“Anything.”

“Then promise always to talk to me in the way you were talking whenever I ask?”

“And when will you ask?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“When I’m in the doldrums. When things are too difficult to cope with. When I feel that nobody loves me.”

Then Miles Farady said, simply and very sincerely:

“You must never again feel that nobody loves you.”

Richenda shut her eyes and thought about that. Then she said:

“This isn’t supposed to mean a thing, but I think I do like the name Miles Farady. It has a healing sound.”

When she opened her eyes all the tension had gone from her features. She looked smooth and happy.

“If it’s all the same to you, Doctor, I’d like to pay your fee right now.”

And leaning towards him she brushed his cheek with a kiss. It was unfortunate that Paul Ascherer should have chosen that moment to appear.

“May I join you?” he asked. “I have been looking forward to a talk, Richenda.”

The message of dismissal that he telegraphed to Farady was imperceptible to anybody else.

Farady went slowly towards the house, but his heart was beating extravagantly fast. Ascherer noticed, not without chagrin, that Richenda watched until the figure had vanished.

"A personable young man," said he, "and he knows his job. You met in the mountains, did you not?"

"Yes."

"A very romantic setting. I am sorry I turned up so unexpectedly, and you must forgive an old man for asking if what he saw was not a little cheap?"

Richenda may have been angry but she was not embarrassed.

"I don't think so. Dr. Farady had been very kind and he deserved a kiss."

Paul Ascherer misquoted Shakespeare.

"Treat every man according to his deserts and who shall 'scape a kissing.' I am perhaps a little old-fashioned in my ideas. To me the bloom of youth cannot be too jealously guarded."

"I can look after myself. I've had plenty of experience."

He took one of her hands and stroked it.

"Much too much. Your's has been a homeless youth, my dear. You have missed a great deal that every child has a right to expect. It makes me very sad to think of that."

Richenda thought:

"Now what?"

Usually the first to put herself out of reach of the caresses of an old man, she could not understand why she was able to let Ascherer fondle her hand without a feeling of revulsion. In a sense she found it rather a comforting contact. He went on:

"I am afraid your return to Warrant has been a

keen disappointment. Like most geniuses there is little of the patriarch in his composition. He occupies a dream world of his own."

Richenda was not going to be drawn into fresh confidences. She said:

"You have known my father a long time, have you not?"

"For over a quarter of a century. A periodical in which I was interested published some of his earliest drawings. They were revolutionary. At that time he was at South Kensington working at physics, or organic chemistry—I forget which. His professor was heart-broken when he abandoned science and took up architecture. Warrant is the kind of man who is inevitably brilliant in whatever he elects to follow. It is tragic that nature so often demands from genius so high a price."

But Richenda did not want to talk about that.

"You knew my mother?"

"Very well. I was best man at her wedding. She was a very lovely woman. With you here I could almost believe she was by my side."

Richenda said:

"It's getting a little cold, I think I'll go in."

His hand restrained her.

"Wait one moment. You would not grudge me the pleasure of a few minutes' talk. Besides, I have a favour to ask. I would not ask it if I felt that I should be robbing Warrant of anything that would make his life at all happier, but I feel that Warrant

is sufficient unto himself. In that he has the advantage of me, for never was a man less complete unto himself than I am. Unfortunately, Venice and I have no children. It is a very lasting grief to—no doubt to both of us. It would make me very happy, Richenda, if—if you would consent to regard this as your home. No, don't be startled. There is nothing unusual in an old man seeking to adopt a daughter. You would be free to come and go as you please, and I need hardly say that you would lack for nothing. Turn it over in your mind, my dear, and give me your answer when you are ready to do so."

Richenda was silent for a moment, and when she spoke her voice sounded a little hard.

"You are very kind. But there seem to have been so many homes in my life, and I belonged in none of them. I am beginning to think it's almost time I had one of my own where I should belong."

"I think I understand," he nodded. "Let us talk about it some other time."

Richenda went ahead of him into the house. She wanted to see her father. She found him, dead drunk, to all appearances, with his head among the guttering candles and an unfinished sketch beneath his hand. It was some time before she succeeded in shaking him into wakefulness.

"Mr. Ascherer wants me to live here as his adopted daughter," she said.

Clive Warrant rubbed his face sleepily. His voice was thick as mud at a river bottom.

"He does, does he? Very generous, I'm sure."

There was a break in Richenda's voice as she cried: "Father! Father! Father! Are you ready to give me up—without a word?"

"Give you up? You're old enough to go where you please. S'nothing to do with me. No doubt Paul be ver' generous."

His hand dropped from the table and swung limply. Richenda looked at him in despair.

"How do you propose to get home?" she asked.

"Car. Drive car."

She shook her head hopelessly—helplessly.

"I'll ask Dr. Farady to give you something."

He waved the suggestion aside.

"Perfec' control faculties."

She hesitated.

"And there's nothing you want to say to Mr. Ascherer?"

"Ahyes! Mus' have a word with him—jusaword."

• • • • •

Paul Ascherer beckoned Farady to come on to the terrace.

"I am not paying you to make love to my guests," he said.

Farady stiffened.

"You couldn't pay me to do that."

Ascherer nodded approvingly. He admired spirit.

"A capital answer," said he.

Then Richenda came and took Farady away.

## 10.

Clive Warrant did not fall asleep again after Richenda went from the room. For some moments he stared at his watch, holding it beneath one of the candles and rubbing the dial upon which a mist appeared to have settled. But it was no use. He could not tell the time. Perhaps the hands had fallen off or the mist was on the inside of the glass. He decided not to bother about it. Time was the least important factor in life. He regarded time as a mere record of pleasure spent and a tragedy ahead. He was putting away his watch, with a series of vague plunges at a reluctant pocket, when a clock in the hall began to chime eleven. Clive Warrant bowed towards the sound.

“Thank you. Very obliging of you.”

It then occurred to him that he would not have heard the chime so distinctly had not Richenda left the door open.

Rising upon uncertain feet he crossed the room and closed it. Then he returned to the table and picked up two or three of the crazy sketches he had been making before falling asleep. One by one he held them to his eyes and was gratified to note that each in turn, and for a short while, came nicely into focus. So, after all, there was nothing wrong with his sight—not a thing. The sketches were extraordinarily good—so good that he wondered at their excellence and originality. It was curious that they should have

been good, for his thoughts were back to the old days in the laboratories of South Kensington while he was making them.

From his hip-pocket he drew forth a letter-case and a number of other rough sketches in a crumpled state. These were the ones which he had told Ascherer that he had forgotten to bring. Well, here they were! Chief among them was a drawing that might have been done by Whistler, of a lay-out of the whole little town with the castle atop and a tiny quay, like the quay at Sark, couched beneath the cliff. It was remarkable that such a wealth of detail and suggestion could be conveyed by such an economy of lines on so small a surface. In another was a design for the casino, rather more elaborated, and yet another depicted a group of villas bisected by twisting flights of steps and tied together with bridges. Pieced and patterned together an illusion had been created of some mediæval fairyland city. These strange and fantastic conceits had been executed on odd scraps of paper quarried from any source that had come to hand. The little gallery was typical of a mind at once brilliant and hopelessly undisciplined.

Clive Warrant swept them into a disorderly heap and without bothering to square the corners, folded and refolded and tossed them aside.

Then, from an inner compartment of the letter-case he took a moderately large stamped envelope. Having regard to the casual way he had handled the sketches a further example of his inconsistency of conduct was

provided by the extreme delicacy he displayed in handling the envelope. He treated it as though it was a document of the greatest value and rarity. Pressing the edges he caused it to open its mouth to receive the sketches. These he placed inside with the nicety that a man might concentrate on the preparation of a microscopic slide. He did not gum down the flap but, leaving it unstuck, laid the envelope on the table and wrote in pencil: "Clive Warrant, Esq., Rue des Petits Champs, 17, Nice, Côte d'Azur." Because he had drunk a great deal that night, the pencil ran unsteadily and stumbled badly at the task of writing the street number. But he did not allow himself to worry over a trifle like that. He had become used to a trembling hand and did not care how it behaved when not actually employed in drawing. The job over, he leaned back in his chair and began to hum one of his tuneless airs in a deep bass.

The door opened and Farady came into the room.

Warrant scowled, not because he was displeased to see the young man but because he was unable to see him on account of the fog which had gathered before his eyes again.

"I didn't know you were still here, Mr. Warrant," said Farady, not wishing to advertise the fact that he had been sent by Richenda.

Clive Warrant boomed, sepulchrally:

"What are you after, young man?"

"I was having a scout round for a whisky and soda."

"Hm! Take my advice—don't touch it. 'Wine is a mocker and strong drink is raging.'"

Farady said:

"It certainly was raging earlier on. The party seems to have broken up. Our friend Renanceau pushed off a few minutes ago. Are you driving yourself to Nice?"

"I am. Why? Do you want a lift?"

"No thanks. I'm stopping here."

"My dear fellow," said Warrant. "Oh, my dear fellow!"

He rummaged in his pocket for a loose cigarette, threw out a hand and knocked over one of the candlesticks.

Farady came forward to rescue it, but was waved aside.

"It's of no consequence." Once more the hand went out, plucking vaguely in the direction of a light.

Farady watched the movements with professional interest and peered intently at Warrant's eyes. He noted how bloodshot they were, but that was not all. The irises had a queer suggestion of insensitivity.

"Mr. Warrant," he said, "I hope you won't think it cheek, but I heard you complain about trouble with your eyes at dinner tonight. As a medical man I would seriously advise you to see somebody about them. It isn't worth while to take risks."

Warrant's arm described a slow arc and his hand came to rest on Farady's wrist.

"Young man, I am going to tell you a profound truth. The only thing that is worth taking is a risk. My eyes may not be perfect, but they see many things they would rather not see. Too many. However, if my eyes afford you any interest, come along to my villa tomorrow and we'll talk 'em over. Tonight I have other things to think about. By the way, you can render me a service. You'll be seeing Ascherer before you go to bed?"

"I can."

"Then pray do. Present this envelope. It contains a number of ideas for *Paradis sur Mer*. Ask him to look them through, scribble any notes he wishes to make, then seal the envelope and have one of the servants see that it catches the last post. Tell him I am in the mood to work and that it is imperative that those sketches reach me first thing in the morning."

Farady picked up the envelope.

"Very well. But you wouldn't care to see him yourself?"

"Oh, God, no." And, with a sort of plunging movement, he went towards the door.

"Mr. Warrant," said Farady, "with your eyes in their present state, it isn't safe for you to drive along the Corniche."

"What you mean, not safe?"

"Anything could happen—an accident—you might kill yourself."

Clive Warrant assumed a pose of extraordinary dignity.

"Tha's entirely my own affair. Moreover, I do not know of any safer state than being dead. And now I come to think of it, I have a chauffeur. Give you good night."

With a sort of dilapidated grandeur he rolled across the hall and on to the driveway, where his car, a hired *voiturette*, was waiting.

Farady watched him collapse on the back seat as the chauffeur started the engine and let in the clutch. He waited until the car was out of sight before taking the envelope to Ascherer's study.

### III.

Leaning against the newel of the stair-rail, a black felt hat perched on the side of his head, and a light coat thrown over his shoulder, was Rentyen. He flashed one of his impish smiles at Farady and nodded at the envelope.

"Handing in your resignation?"

Farady returned the smile.

"Not yet. These are some sketches Warrant asked me to deliver. Going out?"

"For an hour or so at the tables. I'm waiting for Mrs. Ascherer. Care to join us?"

"Thanks, but I'm more or less on duty."

Rentyen gave a light laugh.

"Funny Paul getting the wind up about his health. I suppose the gipsy is the cause of it. By the way, I admire your taste, Doctor. She's charming."

It was absurd for a grown man to blush at a remark like that, and irritating to realise that Rentyen had noticed it. That was just the sort of thing that Rentyen would notice. He said:

“Your secret is quite safe with me.”

“Thanks,” said Farady, shortly. He would have moved on but Rentyen held him with another question.

“What’s your real job in this *galère*? Have you been appointed as poison taster to His Mightiness?”

“If so, I haven’t been told.”

“Ah, but you wouldn’t be. The juice of cursed Hebanon would be administered to you before it reached the royal plate. It isn’t Paul’s way to let people know what they’re in for. Ah! Here’s Venice! I’ll say good night, Doctor.”

Venice Ascherer came down the stairs wrapped in a pinky foam of dyed fox. Farady thought she looked like Venus rising from the sea. One of her slender hands held the cloak to her breast, and from her breast it creamed in melting folds. From her other hung a vanity bag of snakeskin, with a jewelled clasp. A long string of pearls coiled her arm to the elbow. She said:

“Have I kept you waiting too long?”

Rentyen took one of her hands and kissed the palm.

“A lifetime wouldn’t be too long to see you looking as you look tonight.”

With all the *panache* of an eighteenth-century gallant he offered her his arm.

The smoking-room door opened and Culver appeared. One glance at them and his face blackened into a heavy frown.

“Where are you going?” he demanded, rudely.

Rentyen struck an attitude of boyish embarrassment. He turned to Venice.

“Shall we tell him, dear? Do you think we dare?”

“Certainly tell, Faun.”

Rentyen dropped his voice to a confidential level.

“Paddling, Colonel. Yes, paddling. We shall hang our shoes round our necks by the laces and splash along through the salt sea waves. Perhaps, if you’re lucky, we’ll bring you back a few shells to add to your war trophies.”

Culver made no reply, but crossed to the study door and threw it open.

“Paul, I’m afraid you won’t get any bridge tonight. Rentyen and your wife are going out.”

Farady saw Venice’s eyebrows lift almost imperceptibly, and heard Rentyen murmur:

“Hardly in the best public-school tradition.”

Paul Ascherer came out and joined the group. A single glance at Culver’s face had been enough to inform him what had inspired the gratuitous information launched from the door. The man had reached a pitch of jealousy that he could no longer control. Apart from Rentyen’s abilities as an actor, Ascherer held him in little esteem. Rentyen was altogether too illogical, inconsequent and temperamental to be admired by so cold an intellect as Ascherer’s—but he

could not suppress a feeling of amused admiration for his insolent treatment of a man who could have taken him to pieces with one hand. He knew that Culver had given them away in the hope that the visit to the tables would be stopped, or at least discouraged. It was probable, too, that Culver was seeking to discourage the suspicions against himself which Ascherer had voiced earlier in the evening. But all that Culver actually succeeded in doing was to create one of those delicate domestic situations in which Ascherer's twisted sense of humour found a source of cynical delight.

Assuming a severity of countenance which would have dignified any head master, he approached the truant pair and shook his head at them.

"This is a very serious business," he said.

Rentyen, by some trick of expression, managed to look about twelve years old.

"Oh, sir, please, sir," he began in a schoolboy falsetto, "would it be all right, sir, for me to take Mrs. Ascherer out, sir, for a little while, sir." His voice suddenly dropped to its normal register. "You may as well say 'yes' because we shall go in either case."

Paul Ascherer smiled benevolently.

"Very well—ve-ry well, but no late hours, remember."

"Oh, no, sir. I should think it would be quite early before we get in. Good night, and thank you, sir." Then over his shoulder to Culver: "Yah!

Sneak!" Then with a crooked arm for Venice: "If Madame pleases."

Paul Ascherer watched the hall door close behind them. He said, with an eye on Culver:

"There is no doubt that Rentyen makes a charming setting for any woman. No woman would look ridiculous in *his* company."

He turned to Farady.

"Yes? What have you there?"

Farady handed him the envelope.

"Mr. Warrant asked me to give you these sketches. He wants you to look them through, make your notes and see that they are returned to him by the last post tonight. He said something about working in the morning."

Ascherer glanced at the clock.

"Yes, I will see that he has them. Richard, you had better come with me."

But Culver shook his head.

"I have no further interest in *Paradis sur Mer*."

There was a small pause, then Ascherer said:

"Nevertheless you had better come with me."

"Oh. All right. Very well."

They entered the study and closed the door. Then Ascherer said:

"Even from you, Richard, I hardly expected such an exhibition of bad manners. I am not sure that I'm prepared to let it pass."

Culver began to bluster. He wasn't going to be talked to as if he were a child.

“Then why behave like one?”

“I’ll break that fellar Rentyen’s neck.”

The reply came sweetly:

“Not in my house.” And Ascherer shook from the envelope the little pile of drawings.

Culver thumped a fist on the table.

“If you ask me it’s about time you put your house in order.”

“I haven’t asked you.”

“Then it’s a pity you don’t. You accuse me of adulterous conduct I’ve never even thought of, and you let another man make off with your wife under your very nose.”

Paul Ascherer held one of the sketches at the length of his arm, and purred at it.

“A work of genius—pure genius. There is no other word. Good night, Richard. Our partnership is dissolved. I will deal with any financial adjustments in the morning.”

“Yes, but look here . . .”

“I said good night.”

Outside the study door Culver beat his clenched fists one against the other. He thought:

“He’ll finish me—I know he will, unless . . .”

Inside the study Paul Ascherer continued to purr over the drawings. Then he took a sheet of note-paper from the rack and wrote:

“I have nothing but gratitude and admiration. Go ahead.

“P. A.”

He tucked the note with the rest of the sketches into the envelope; licked the flap with an expression of fastidious distaste for the flavour of gum, pressed it down with the heel of his hand, and rang the bell.

To the servant who answered the summons he said: "See that this letter goes without fail by the last post."

When the servant had retired he folded his hands, leant back in his chair and looked at the ceiling with a curious, subtle expression on his face.

"Richenda," he murmured. "She and I together in this house."

His eyelids drooped with sensuous and drowsy contentment.

## 12.

There was always a stir when Rentyen appeared at The Sporting Club. Kings and princes might be greeted with casual glances, but Rentyen captured and held the attention. His swift, light-footed walk, which gave the impression that he intended to pass right through the room and out the other side, was an unfailing source of public interest. No less did they admire his sudden and apparently motiveless halts—the lightning smiles he shed to right and left, and his moods of inviolable detachment. It did not matter what companion accompanied him, he contrived to give an impression of absolute isolation when before the public eye.

It was the greatest rarity for him to take a seat at a table. He was a rover, ever, so to speak, on his toes; taking a sip from a glass offered on a tray by one of the club servants and paying a hundred francs for the sip; darting here, there; rapping out a swift "Banco!"; winning, losing; always indifferent; always on the move, gay, alive.

"Hello, Chichester! Doing any good, Arlen? Why, there's . . ." and on again.

Coming to rest from one of his flights, he felt Venice touch his sleeve. She tilted her head and pointed with her eyes.

"Have you noticed? At the big table. Renanceau." Rentyen looked and nodded.

"Ahum! He seems to be going it."

At the table which is encompassed by red cords on brass pillars, as a silent warning to all but the very wealthy to keep outside, sat the Marquis de Renanceau et de la Tour Basane. He was one of a distinguished company of ladies and gentlemen, comprising a deposed European monarch, two American millionaires, a minister of the British Government, a member of the Greek Syndicate, somebody's mistress and a very old lady with a grey face and dirty hands.

The Marquis was running the bank, which operation was slightly impeded by a great pile of thousand-franc notes which he had already won. Behind his chair, and just outside the red cord, a number of people had gathered to watch the play. In the centre of the table was an orderly pile of notes and plaques

ever changing their pattern beneath the controlling spatula of the croupier.

As Venice and Rentyen moved towards the table the croupier in a ringing voice announced the contents of the bank. The figure was impressive, and as he named it the words jangled like the couplings of railway trucks in a shunting-yard.

*“Qui veut la banque?”*

Seemingly the old woman with dirty hands wanted it.

“*Banco*,” she quacked. Picked up her cards and faced them. An eight.

The Marquis showed no agitation as, with a fingernail he reversed his own cards.

*“Neuf, Madame.”*

From the onlookers rose a medley of exclamations: “The luck of the fellow!” “*C'est effrayant!*” “Ever see anything like it?” “That's the ninth coup.”

The croupier intoned:

*“Neuf à la banque.”*

The old lady made no fuss. She transferred bundles of thousand-franc notes from her bag to the table. There was no need to worry. The night-shifts were working in five of her husband's munition factories. His profits from the Gran Chaco war alone were more than enough to liquidate any small extravagances in which she indulged.

Rentyen threw a swift glance at the other players. In nearly every instance they wore an expression of heavy concentration, the gambler's mask behind which excitement is concealed. Each one of them was

silently asking the same series of questions: "Will the run break?" "Shall I take a chance?" "Is this the moment?" One or two were fingering money tentatively.

The Marquis touched the corners of his mouth with a handkerchief, and drew his chair a little nearer the table. It was evident that he intended to go on.

A rapid calculation by the croupier. A pile of money disappearing into the *canyot*. A number of perforated slips torn from a book and tossed aside: and then, once more, the formidable contents of the bank rang out through a hush of excitement.

The Marquis had moved the shoe to a position beneath a poised right hand. A silence, and the jangling trucks again.

"*Qui veut la banque? Il y a cinq cents quatre-vingts milles, six cents cinquante francs à la banque.*"

Rentyen caught Venice's eye and tilted his head towards the table.

"Shall I have a go?"

Her hand fastened on his wrist.

"Heavens, no. Half a million francs! Faun, you couldn't possibly afford it."

He looked wicked.

"I doubt if I could afford you, but that won't stop me." He lifted his voice. "*Banco!*"

"*Banco est demander,*" echoed the croupier.

There was a brief exchange of glances between Rentyen and the Marquis. The Marquis' fingers moved towards the back of the shoe, a preface perhaps,

to giving it that little push which implies a decision to pass the hand. But before the gesture was complete a big American, with a bulging shirt-front and a ten-inch cigar, rapped twice with his knuckles.

“*Banco à table.*”

The croupier took it up, with a sympathetic smile to Rentyen.

“*Banco est demandé à table.*”

The Marquis de Renanceau did not hesitate. He did not even measure his opponent. With swift fingers he gave the cards, leaned back in his chair and looked at a chandelier. The American picked up his cards with the air of a man who is thoroughly bored by the whole proceedings. For a space he examined them as though they exhibited a cryptic message which demanded greater intelligence than his own to decipher. In the silence the surrounding air became electric. It was as if great nations were trembling on the brink of war.

The Marquis said:

“*Il y a beaucoup de temps—beaucoup de temps.*”

Then the American spoke:

“Yes, I’ll take a card.”

Once again Renanceau’s finger-nail reversed his own cards.

A queen and an eight.

The American drew a cheque-book from his pocket. Then happened something that nobody who was acquainted with Renanceau would have believed possible. He clasped his hands in a gesture of prayer

and pressed them to his forehead. And in a voice that sounded like a sob he uttered the words:

“*Dieu de Dieu. Je vous remerci.*” In a second he recovered himself and turned to apologise. “I ask your pardon, Monsieur, the coup was of some importance.” He tapped the shoe with the back of his hand and rose. “*Je passe la main.*”

Accompanied by two liveried servants, bearing baskets filled to the brim with winnings, he hastened from the room.

Possibly Rentyen felt that the Frenchman had stolen his thunder, for there was a shade of bitterness in his tone when he asked:

“Can he afford to play the big game?”

Venice shook her head.

“I was amazed. He has virtually nothing. The poor old boy lost nearly all he had during the war.”

Rentyen sniffed.

“Backing the Germans?”

“Darling, that isn’t worthy of you. Do you realise what would have happened if your *banco* had been accepted?”

But Rentyen wasn’t listening. One of his airy salutations was flying across to the ex-king.

“How are you, sir? A lively game, what?”

The ex-king thought:

“Very agreeable of him to recognise me—a popular fellow like that!”

Being pleased he bought the bank for an extravagant sum and lost it on the first coup.

13.

Quite a procession of club servants followed the Marquis to the door and a prominent official asked if he would like a bodyguard to escort him home with his winnings. But the Marquis declined the offer.

"I am not without protection," he said, and tapped a pocket suggestively.

Having distributed a few very modest tips he entered his car, where he sat forward on the back seat, a borrowed suit-case on his lap containing the money and a loaded automatic lying beneath his hand.

He had instructed the chauffeur to return to La Peruse and during the drive he abandoned himself to happy imaginings. Never before had he risked all to gain all. In the past his gambling adventures had been half-hearted affairs which, had they succeeded, which they rarely did, would have failed to rescue him from his financial predicament. But tonight he had risked his last penny in one bold effort towards recovery. He had taken the risk and had triumphed. Here in the suit-case was enough, and more than enough, to rebuy Renanceau from Ascherer. He had no misgivings about the business. Ascherer would be ready enough to sell if he could see a profit. He could not really want to transform Renanceau into a vulgar playground. It was just a gamble, that was all, an elaborate catch-penny invention of a subtle brain. Unlike himself Ascherer had no love at stake. He would violate nothing in sacrificing the project in

return for a lump sum. Renanceau had been saved—saved by an ex-king, a mass-producing motor-car manufacturer, and the wife of a maker of munitions. Long might they survive.

As the car wended its way along the winding lower road from Monte Carlo to Rocquebrune the Marquis no longer felt alone. In the car were gathered with him an honourable company of dead Renanceaus, each one of whom had rendered some service to the honour of the name. Like all men who live beneath the spell of family traditions the Marquis liked the sense of being surrounded and supported by departed kinsmen. Since his hand had been forced by Ascherer into parting with the castle, he had suffered a dreadful consciousness of being shunned by that spirit company. They had withdrawn from him the light of their countenance. They had set their faces against him. They had turned their iron backs. They had made him an outcast. It was good to welcome them again—to feel the warmth of their appreciation—good—so very good.

There was a mist before his eyes as the car turned into the tortuous driveway of La Peruse. In that mist the lights from the windows swam like reflections upon running water. He sniffed, noisily; brushed up his moustache with the back of his hand and corrected the angle of his tie. What lay before him was business, pure and simple, and in business there is no room for sentiment.

Carrying the suit-case he stepped from the car and

approached the front door. He had mounted three steps when an impulse of generosity persuaded him to return.

"You may take the car to the *Café Tribunaux*, Laurent, and buy yourself a drink. I will walk down the hill when I am ready to return." And he dropped a two-franc piece into the chauffeur's palm.

"*Voilà!* You will drink to the honour of Renanceau."

With a feeling of extraordinary well-being he mounted the steps and rang the bell.

Paul Ascherer was not surprised when Holmes announced that the Marquis had returned and would be glad of a few moments' conversation. Throughout the evening the Marquis had displayed an admirable stoicism, but it was not outside the bounds of probability that his reserve had broken down. Ascherer nodded assent and Renanceau was shown into the study carrying the suit-case.

"Come in, my dear Jean, and sit down. That will be all, Holmes, unless the Marquis will consent to stay the night? For I see you have brought your things," and he tilted his head towards the suit-case.

Renanceau murmured a polite refusal, and drew up a chair. He felt no anxiety as to the success of his mission. He smiled at his host, breathed on his finger-nails and polished them on the lapels of his coat. In the enjoyment of his security he was in no hurry to state the nature of his business.

"You gave to us a very charming dinner, Paul. Your chef is an artist. The *Bécasse pressé* was a poem."

Ascherer acknowledged the tribute with a slight inclination of the head. He knew all this was mere preamble—a red carpet across the pavement—a covered way to the party. Renanceau went on:

“I cannot recall any meal that was served with a greater refinement of taste.”

“Nor one in which the other refinements were more noticeably lacking, eh Jean?”

Renanceau gave a deprecatory shrug.

“Some of your guests were not, shall I say, *en accord*, but for myself . . .”

Ascherer did not let him finish.

“For yourself, Jean, I have nothing but admiration. I have been wanting to tell you how much I appreciate the manner in which you have accepted your reverses. To be a good loser is a great accomplishment.”

Renanceau bowed.

“To be a good winner is even more so. To win, as you have won, *mon ami*, with grace, is a rarity. In a man’s moments of triumph we find so often a most shocking arrogance. Even in trivial successes may this be seen. But yesterday, *mon ami*, I have fresh proof. I am playing the golf. The match goes to the last green. My opponent, who until then is charming, modest, agreeable, sinks from twenty feet the putt. I lose. He wins—and in a moment he is a man transformed. He is no longer a gentleman. He is peacock of the spread tail. He struts before me to the club-house, and I do not exaggerate when I say

that even his bottom swings from side to side like a banner of victory."

Paul Ascherer smiled.

"That would suggest that our triumphs should be conducted from a chair. Now, Jean, how about coming to the point?"

But Renanceau would not allow himself to be hurried.

"Tonight I have the impression that *le Colonel* he does not believe in the scheme for *Paradis sur Mer*."

"Quite right. He has backed out."

The Marquis found it hard to conceal his satisfaction.

"So? *Le Colonel* is a man of perception. He had good reasons, *sans doute*."

"Not very, but I was more than glad to acquire his interest."

This did not make such pleasant hearing.

"But you, my dear Paul, you too must have realised that it is, to say the least, *un peu speculatif*? I cannot believe that you would not readily withdraw were you to be offered a suitable *benefice*?"

"Such as?"

"Ten—fifteen per cent on your capital outlay."

Ascherer took a sip from a glass of brandy and soda and shook his head.

"No, nor anything like it. Besides, where is the money to come from?"

Renanceau filled his chest and swept up his moustaches with a two-handed gesture.

“From me.”

“And the security?”

“Notes on the Bank of France,” and with dramatic suddenness he opened the suit-case and poured a cascade of bank-notes upon the table.

He had counted upon this effect to banish any possible hesitation from Ascherer’s mind. He had told himself that Ascherer, as a Jew, could not fail to swallow the bait. But he had failed to remember that Ascherer was not only a man of business, but was also an artist and a dreamer. The spectacle of a fortune within reach of his hand had fewer attractions for him than the memory of the sketches by Warrant, which, an hour before he had purred over so with such æsthetic delight.

“*Voilà!*” cried the Marquis. “Help yourself, *mon ami*. I shall not quarrel at the price you ask. Take your pound of flesh and give me back Renanceau.”

Paul Ascherer leant back in his chair with half-closed eyes, a half-formed smile and a hand that waved lightly in the air. He felt both drowsy and disinterested and he yawned.

“Pick up your money, Jean, I have no use for it.”

“Twenty-five per cent profit?” The words might have been blown through a bugle.

“Not even for a hundred per cent. Two hours ago I might have consented, but since then I have seen Clive Warrant’s drawings. I would be a traitor to myself if I abandoned the scheme after that privilege.”

Renanceau began to shake.

"*Non, non, c'est impossible—impossible!* You must—you shall accept. For the honour of my name you shall."

"I have made up my mind, Jean. I shall not alter it."

"Monsieur, I cry to you! On my knees I beg—I pray. Compared to what Renanceau means to me what can it mean to you?"

Ascherer was aware of a slight feeling of nausea which any display of unbridled emotions provoked in him.

"You are wasting your breath, Jean."

"What if I do, when every breath I take fills my lungs with shame if Renanceau is not returned to me. Have you no heart? Have you no respect for the glorious dead? Monsieur, a moment ago my ancestors were gathered around me—and I was one with them—a man—a gentleman—a brother." And in his agitation he picked up Ascherer's glass and put it to his lips.

Ascherer rose and moved to the fireplace.

"I'm afraid that kind of talk makes my gorge rise," he said. "It is difficult enough to deal with the problems of the living. I have no time to concern myself with the dead. And incidentally that is my glass."

The Marquis put down the glass and pointed an accusing finger.

"Jew—Jew—Jew!"

"If you intend that as a reproach, Marquis, I fail to find it one. You have very little to complain about."

You have frittered your way through life, indulging in small and trivial dishonesties, squandering money on petty extravagances, and mortgaging and remortgaging your estates to pay for them. You talk a great deal about family honour but I am unable to find that you have contributed to its honour in a single constructive way. You started with everything and have finished with nothing. I started with nothing and finish with a great deal. And why? because I have not been afraid to work. In the course of that work I saw your derelict castle and developed an idea whereby it might be of service and entertainment to mankind. I determined to get it, and after twelve years, I have got it. You have no one but yourself to blame for that. My methods may have been hard, but they were fair. It is absurd to imagine that I shall give up what I have worked so industriously to acquire, just because you have had one of those fantastic runs of luck at the table. Business is not conducted that way. So pack up your money, Marquis—*Paradis sur Mer* is going to be built."

With slow and deliberate gestures the Marquis de Renanceau returned the notes to the bag and snapped the lock. His face was paper white and with the realisation of his failure his body was numb. Hope was dead and he felt that he had died with it. He picked up the bag, went to the door and turned.

"No doubt your particular gods, Monsieur, will applaud your action in this matter. It may not be

very long before you are in a position to hear them do so."

Ascherer swung round and spoke sharply.

"What do you imply by that?"

"There is one thing which even the meanest man cannot refuse."

"What?"

"His life, Monsieur. *Bon soir.*"

He went quietly from the room and closed the door. He went as quietly from the house. A short distance down the driveway he stopped and lifted up his head to the spangled sky.

"Is this to be borne?" he asked of the stars.

He turned and looked towards the house. A rod of light shone through the curtains of the study window. A voice seemed to whisper in his ear "Why not?" and again "Why not?" He thrust the suit-case into the shelter of a myrtle and returned to the house, treading softly by the grass border. Outside the study window he halted and peered through the curtains into the room beyond.

Ascherer was standing by his table mixing another drink. There was a suggestion of nervousness in the way he threw back his head and emptied the glass. He sat down jerkily and rested his chin in the hollow of his hands.

Renanceau thought:

"He is quite still. He will not move from that position. This is my chance."

He took the automatic from his pocket and, turning

his back on the window so that the light fell upon it, drew back the breech to satisfy himself that a cartridge was in place. He felt, rather than saw, Farady approaching from the right. With clumsy haste he thrust the pistol into a side pocket and went down on his knees peering in the grass.

Farady said:

“Hullo, Marquis! I thought you had gone. Have you lost something?”

Renanceau wrenched at his shirt-front with a thumb.

“Yes, yes. A pearl stud. I have the idea I feel him drop.”

“That’s too bad. Let’s have a look.”

But Farady was not satisfied that he had been told the truth. Renanceau had not been looking for a pearl when he saw him from ten yards away. He had been busy with something which had vanished into a pocket. He struck a match and made a pretence of searching the grass. While doing so he shot a glance at the shirt-front. The pearl was there, on the underside.

“Look,” he said, “it had only come adrift.”

Renanceau rose with a self-deprecatory laugh.

“How stupid I am. I thank you very much.”

“That’s all right,” said Farady, with a gesture of exoneration which brought his knuckles into contact with a hard object in Renanceau’s pocket. “Good night, Marquis.”

“*Bonne nuit. Dormez bien.*”

Farady watched him march off with queer, stilted steps.

“I’ll be damned!” he thought.

He turned and looked through the gap in the curtains. He saw Ascherer moving towards the door. That hard object in Renanceau’s pocket had felt like a pistol. Richenda was right—they were a queer lot!

#### 14.

Miles Farady’s room adjoined the suite occupied by Ascherer. Richenda’s room was opposite. He divined that fact by the presence of a very small pair of shoes outside her closed door. To his everlasting humiliation, but secret delight, he had kissed those shoes on his way to bed. It would have been vastly more satisfactory to kiss their owner, but opposed to the realisation of that desire was a matter of personal courage and discretion.

As he undressed Farady reflected that it was good to know that Richenda was so near. His first evening at La Peruse had encouraged a belief that it was a house in which pretty well any calamity might befall. The enmities and the hatreds he had seen at work were of such an intensity that it would be foolish to ignore the possibility of danger. Men did not hate like that without doing something about it. A condition of affairs prevailed which, sooner or later, was bound to produce a violent development.

Farady got into his pyjama legs and stretching him-

self face downwards on the floor began his nightly dozen "on the hands raise!" He had done about ten when he heard a gentle knock at a not very distant door. The reply was inaudible, but a second later he heard Ascherer's voice ask gently:

"If you are not asleep, may I come in?"

In an instant Farady was on his feet and opened his door just in time to see Ascherer vanish into Richenda's room. His first impulse was to cross the corridor and drag Ascherer out of it; and this he would certainly have done had any sound of protest come from Richenda. But since no such sound did come, he stood, naked to the waist, angry, indignant and very much perplexed. He did not believe that Richenda could be anything but hostile to her host's intrusion. In their talks she had given no suggestion of affection for the man, and had treated him in the garden with a sort of tolerant indifference. She had given no impression that Ascherer exercised over her any controlling influence—as undoubtedly he did with other members of the household, and notably Culver.

Leaving his door ajar he put on his pyjama coat and a dressing-gown and waited developments.

Richenda was in bed with a book propped against her knees and a reading-lamp on the table by her side. After the first startled glance when Ascherer entered the room, her eyes had returned to the book as though what she read was of so much interest that she could not detach her thoughts from it. In actual fact, however, her thoughts had no association with

the printed page, being occupied with the comforting knowledge that Miles Farady's room was less than ten paces from her own; that Miles Farady was in that room and, if called, could be relied upon to come to her aid in a matter of seconds. It was not that there appeared to be any likelihood that she would have to call him, for her visitor seemed satisfied to stand just inside the door, smiling towards her with every evidence of the kindest intentions. His voice came to her ears like the sound of gentle waves running over sand.

"I am afraid you have been rather neglected, Richenda. It was through no will of mine you were left so much alone."

Richenda kept her eyes on the book and turned one of its pages.

"I haven't felt neglected. I was glad to go to bed early. I've been on the trek most of the day."

"Yes, yes, I had forgotten. Tomorrow we must try and arrange to do something together."

"Yes—why not?"

He approached and seated himself naturally on the end of her bed. Then he put out a hand and patted the coverlet.

"Are your feet tired?"

Richenda thought:

"What an extraordinary question! Like an old nurse. That *is* what he's like, too. An old nurse."

There was comfort in the reflection—comfort real and deep. Since she was five years old Richenda

could not recall any other person who had fussed over her in that sort of way. But of all people in the world why should Ascherer elect to do so? He was a man with an almost universal reputation for callousness and want of heart. She thought:

“Perhaps he’s a little mad—has a weak spot.”

She heard herself give a small rippling laugh.

“Tired? Of course they are not. What a funny question.”

“Is it? It’s a very natural one. It is natural to wonder and to worry over those we love.”

At the word love Richenda withdrew behind her book again.

“Love is a pretty big word,” she said. “It isn’t one I’d expect you to use carelessly.”

He laid a hand on the pyramid made by her knees.

“Try to believe that I did not use it carelessly.”

The pyramid collapsed and he took away his hand. The tender light in his eyes changed to an expression that was more analytic.

“I overheard you talking to one of the servants tonight. Your French isn’t too good. An effort should be made to improve that.”

Richenda gasped. His tone had been so authoritative.

“However we can talk about that tomorrow, my dear. I am very happy to have you with me.” He held out a hand and involuntarily she put one of hers into it. As in the garden he patted it lovingly. Even his eyes seemed to caress it. “Yours is a good hand—firm but fine—just the hand I should wish you to

have. But I think you should abandon the silly practice of staining your nails. Isn't it a fraction *démodé*? Nature is not really improved by the use of coloured collodion. Well, again good night." And bending towards her he kissed her cheek. "Ring the bell when you want to get up."

He went towards the door, paused and touched his throat with sensitive fingers.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I don't think so. A sort of dryness, that is all."

He went out, stepping daintily over the two little shoes. He was moving towards his own apartment when he noticed that the door of Farady's room was ajar. Frowning, he crossed the corridor and pushed it open.

Farady, with folded arms, was seated on his bed. He gave the impression of being on guard.

"Want anything?" he asked, truculently.

"Yes." Ascherer closed the door. "Were you, by any chance, spying on me?"

"No. I was just standing by."

"Indeed. For what?"

"In case I was wanted." There was nothing conciliatory in the tone of the reply.

"Dr. Farady," said Ascherer, "what I choose to do in this house, or outside, for that matter, is entirely my own affair. You would do well to remember that, if you wish to keep your present appointment."

"I am not sure that I do wish to keep it. I happen

to have fallen in love with Richenda Warrant. P'raps you'll remember that next time you want to say good night—and say it from outside the door."

Paul Ascherer's severity relaxed into a smile that was positively human.

"Well, well, well," said he. "I see that I shall have to watch my step, Doctor. But it is good to know that Richenda has such a redoubtable champion."

He went from the room chuckling delightedly.

Farady waited until he heard the click of the adjoining latch, then crossed and rapped on the panel of Richenda's door. There was no reply and he asked in a clear voice:

"Honey! Are you all right?"

"Miles is it? Yes, of course I am."

"Oh!" He sounded rather disappointed. "I suppose I can't come in and—make sure? After all I am a doctor."

The voice said:

"Come in, Doctor."

He went in and stared at her, critically.

"Yes, you look all right."

She said:

"You don't. You look worried."

"Well, what do you expect? You are a fool not to lock your door."

"Now?" she asked.

"Of course not now. *I'm* with you. Don't be stupid."

"Oh I see, I'm all right so long as you're with me."

But Farady only frowned at the laughter in her eyes. Suddenly he burst out:

"I want to know what all this is about? What's he up to? I mean, what's he—what's the idea?"

Richenda shook her head and her curls began to dance.

"I don't know. He beats me."

"Beats you? I'll soon . . ."

"To understand, idiot."

"Oh, oh." But he was only partially placated. "Look here, if he tries to make love to you—if there's the least sign of any funny business . . ."

"But there isn't. That's the strange part of it."

Farady scowled.

"He must talk about something."

"He does, but not what you'd expect."

"Then what *does* he say?"

Richenda collected her memory.

"Well, for one thing, that my French was very bad and would have to be improved."

"Don't talk nonsense."

"But he did. He *said* that."

"He's mad. What else?"

Richenda pulled her ears as a refreshment to thought.

"Oh, I know. He said I wasn't to paint my fingernails any more."

"Do you paint them?"

"A little."

"Show me?"

She showed.

"And he told you to stop doing it?"

"Yes."

"Well, he was perfectly right," said Farady.  
"Putting a lot of filth like that on your fingers."

"Out of my room!" said Richenda. "Go on—out of it!"

"Don't make such a row."

"A row? Why you . . ."

Miles Farady took her face in his hands and kissed her into a state of silence and subjection.

"Well!" said Richenda, "Well! I'd like to know what the General Medical Council will have to say to all this."

"But you are not a patient, darling, and never will be. Now lock your door and go to sleep."

As he went from the room his heart was beating so fast and so thunderously that he was given the insane impression that he rode from her side upon a motor-bike.

## 15.

Venice Ascherer breathed a sigh of relief when at last she succeeded in withdrawing Rentyen from the attractions of his own personality as exhibited at The Sporting Club. Save for his one reckless demand of "Banco," which, if accepted, would inevitably have ruined him, he had not gambled, but she felt that he was in a mood that might lead him into mischief. She realised, intuitively, that he was suffering from a hang-over of excitement. The excitement

had formed a sort of high-tension electric coil somewhere near his solar plexus, discharging tributary thrills that tingled deliciously in his hair and on his finger-tips. It had been colossal fun punting against that colossal bank, even though fate, in the guise of the American, had cheated him of the satisfaction of playing the hand. With characteristic inconsistency he liked to believe that he would have won the coup had the cards been given him. He dismissed from his mind the dull fact that nothing on earth could have changed the order of the cards in the shoe to have allowed him to win. It was more amusing the other way on. In imagination he had seen himself indifferently tossing a nine on to the table and turning to address some triviality to Venice as though the affair was of no importance whatever. Having been denied these sensational satisfactions he departed from the club in a dangerously adventurous mood.

Drumming his finger-nails on his lower teeth, he sat upright on the back seat of the car and watched the lights on the water below with expressions ranging from intense hostility to rather a pitying tolerance.

Venice said:

“Faun, darling, do stop acting! There’s only me to see you now.”

“What?” Her words brought him down to earth from the empyrean. He looked at her as though amazed that she was in the car. “How sweet you look! How sweet you are! My sweet, eh?”

“That’s it,” said Venice.

He frowned.

“But you aren’t—not altogether—not yet.”

“In spirit,” said she.

“Yes, yes, yes. Just in spirit. Sometimes I think it’s a pity I was born so pure.”

Venice found it difficult not to smile.

“Are you so pure?”

“Hideously. A kind of Lily Maid of Astolat—that’s me. I have no use for adultery. What I need and take must be undividedly mine. No matter how great the risks—it must be mine.”

Venice said:

“Like that pool at the Sporting Club tonight?”

“In a sense, yes.”

“But you didn’t really want the money?”

“Lord, no! But I wanted to win it.”

“Dear me!” said Venice, “that puts me in a very doubtful position.”

But Rentyen was not an attentive listener.

“I think, if I had won, I would have returned it to poor Renanceau.”

“And if you won me would you return me to poor Paul?”

Rentyen became a man of tempered steel.

“If you have any doubt about that I will get out and walk.”

“Darling!” she said, and soothed his injured pride with a cool hand pressed to his cheek.

Rentyen gave a gusty sigh.

"Fate has treated me very cruelly tonight," he complained. "Twice I have been within an ace of adventure and both times it has escaped me."

"Both times?"

"Once at the tables and before that with Culver. You didn't know that I challenged him to a duel."

"Faun!"

"Don't worry. He refused to fight. Something will have to be done, Venice. A man can't tune himself up to concert pitch and then creep off to bed as if it were an ordinary day. No, no—something very definite will have to be done."

Venice said:

"But isn't it better to leave something for tomorrow? I'll give you a three bromides tablet and that will settle you down nicely for the night."

Rentyen shook his head.

"Nothing short of a club," he assured her, "would settle me down for the night. I feel dynamic—unsatisfied. I feel as I felt in the war, when waiting to go over the top. Keyed up to the final *nth* of mental and physical excitement. There is a bomb in my hand that no earthly power can prevent me from throwing."

The car stopped. They had arrived. Only two lights shone in the upstairs windows. They were at opposite ends of the house and came from the rooms occupied by Ascherer and Culver.

In the hall was a tray with drinks and sandwiches. Venice nodded towards it.

"Do you want a drink?"

Rentyen shook his head.

"No. Nothing. In my present mood a super-charger would be fatal."

They mounted the stairs together and turned along the corridor in the opposite direction from Ascherer's suite. At the door of Venice's room he kissed her wrists, touched her hair and moved quickly away. A door, a little farther down the corridor, closed almost, but not quite imperceptibly as he passed. Rentyen smiled to himself and went to his own room.

Venice stood before a mirror and surveyed her reflection with a sigh.

"He *is* pure," she said, perhaps a little sadly.

Rentyen whistled to himself as he undressed and put on a pair of lounge pyjamas, purchased during a visit to Hollywood. They were of black satin with a writhing dragon of white embroidery on the black. They gave him a very raffish appearance. Then he lit a cigarette and went out. The door which had closed when he passed it a few moments before, had mysteriously opened again. Rentyen paused before it, pushed it wide open and looked in. The face of Colonel Culver glared malignantly over the bedcovers. His upper lip was curled back revealing a surprising absence of front teeth. These absentees, looking rather like a dead gold-fish, were recuperating after the exertions of the day in a glass of water by the bedside.

Rentyen, who had intended to say something quite different, nodded towards the glass.

"Studying pond life?" he asked and went out, followed by a hissing noise from the bed.

All the way down the corridor to Ascherer's room he giggled like a schoolboy. There had been a lump of a fellow at Charterhouse whom he used to bait in a similar fashion. He wondered how long Culver was going to stand for it.

He was still giggling when he entered Ascherer's room. Ascherer was not there, but from the adjoining bathroom came a curious noise such as a man makes who is being strangled. Rentyen threw up his head and sprang towards the sound. Ascherer's back was towards him. His chin was held high in the air. He was gargling.

"Lord! You gave me a start," Rentyen exclaimed.

Ascherer stopped gargling and looked round with an air of mild surprise.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Rentyen replied:

"Venice, of course. I thought you knew."

Ascherer took a sip from a glass, lifted his chin and tremoloed.

Rentyen said:

"The throbbing of a linnet's throat is not more sweet to look upon."

Ascherer gestured with his thumb.

"Find yourself a chair. I'll be with you in a minute."

"Right. Let's take things in the order of their importance."

But he did not sit. He judged that it was the kind

of scene that a man should play standing. Presently Ascherer came from the bathroom, dabbing his mouth with a face-towel.

"So you want Venice?"

"I do. Any objections?"

"Several," said Ascherer. It amused him to note how readily he adapted his manner of speech to Rentyen's colloquialism. In the company of such men as the Marquis it was natural to speak in rounded phrases, but Rentyen's clipped questions demanded clipped answers.

Rentyen said:

"Come on, then, let's hear them."

Ascherer got into bed. It seemed a needlessly callous thing to do.

"That would take half the night. Why not tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we should be disturbed. And it need not take long. It takes no time to promise to give her a divorce."

"What makes you think I am the sort of man who gives anything?"

Rentyen shrugged.

"It'd be a chance to break away from your tradition. Do you good to have a change."

"Hm! Hm!" And Ascherer yawned. "My throat feels very funny, and I want to go to sleep. Are you two lovers?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" said Rentyen.

"Not particularly."

His indifference was galling.

“No, we are not.”

“But you want her?”

“Yes.”

Followed a reflective pause. Then Ascherer said:

“You wanted to play Hamlet once, didn’t you?”

“What of it?”

“I rescued you and the public from that calamity.”

“Calamity? What the hell do you mean?”

“Never mind. You haven’t been drinking, have you?”

“No.”

“I was afraid not. Then this—er—rather unusual request is to be taken seriously?”

“It is.”

“What a child you are, Rentyen.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Don’t be offended. I have a great regard for children. Are you fond of children?”

“I adore them.”

“Then why not marry a woman who will give you some?”

“Now, look here . . .” said Rentyen. “Because you and she . . .”

“She?”

“I know what you were driving at.”

“You do? Then you will appreciate my discretion in using no names. Good night, Rentyen. I’m sorry I can’t help, and I admire your spirit in coming here.”

Rentyen said:

“The advantages would be mutual. You must see that. You talk of children. You’re not old. You could marry again, and who knows . . .”

Ascherer cut him short.

“Quite, but I have no need to do so. Good night.”

At the door Rentyen fired a Parthian arrow. It was not in his nature to be cheated of a good exit. His voice rang:

“Don’t deceive yourself that the last word has been spoken. It hasn’t. We love each other, and nothing, do you understand, nothing shall keep us apart.”

Ascherer said:

“Do you want the servants to know?”

Rentyen thought:

“Blast the fellow, he’s killed it—killed it dead.”

He returned to his room on angry legs. It is doubtful into what extravagance of childish indignation he would have been thrown had not the key of his room caught in the pocket of his pyjamas and been flung to the floor. As he stooped to recover it, he conceived an idea to satisfy his injured pride.

He appeared in Culver’s room as that gentleman was about to turn out the light.

“I have finished my mischief for the day,” he said, and tossed the key on to the bed. “So now you can lock me in and go comfortably to bye-byes.”

All very childish, no doubt, but it helped.



## PART II

### I.

RICHENDA AND FARADY were the only members of the household who appeared at breakfast next morning. The rest were served in their own rooms. Richenda was wearing a white flannel coat and skirt and a white blouse dappled with geranium-red spots. A jockey cap of the same material was on her head, its peak pulled cheekily over one eye. A geranium handkerchief floated from her hand.

Farady looked up as she entered, his eyes filled with admiration and his mouth with kedgeree. Rather stuffily he remarked:

“Morning! You look as if you’d just come back from the laundry.”

She held a sleeve beneath his nose and his nostrils caught a faint odour of benzine.

“*Nettoyage à sec*,” she corrected him. “Do you think my French has improved this morning?”

He captured her hand and kissed it. She tried to draw it away, but he would not let her.

“The nails certainly have. You’ve got rid of that muck.”

“It’s the duty of a guest to try and please her host.”

“Go on, you did it for me.”

“Even if I did that’s no excuse to talk with your mouth full. What is there for breakfast?”

She moved to the sideboard, raised and replaced the covers of a number of steaming dishes and returned to the table with a peach. She said:

“Look here, Master Farady, this routine of I say this and you say that and we finish with a clinch is all very well in its way; but if you want to make the grade you’ll have to offer better service.”

“What do you mean?”

“My father. I’m worried about his eyes. Do you think you have enough persuasive powers to get him to see somebody?”

“I’ll have a try.”

“Right now?”

“Straightaway—if Ascherer will spare me.”

“Then go and ask him.”

Farady looked rather disappointed.

“At once? I had an appointment with the marmalade.”

“Cut the marmalade. And listen. If he doesn’t want you to go, say it is my wish you should.”

“Would that help?”

“It might.”

Farady departed on his errand. He met Rentyen coming down the stairs. Rentyen said:

“I’m sure I’ve got up three hours too early. What time is it?”

“About nine-thirty.”

"Well, there you are. Messed up the morning properly."

In response to Farady's knock a voice said "Come."

Ascherer was sitting up in bed with his back to the window. He held a mirror before his open mouth.

"Aah—aah—aah!" he uttered. "Yes, I was going to send for you. Have a look at my throat."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, I imagine. Probably one of these Casino throats. I have always said the Riviera was the most unhealthy place in the world."

Farady washed a spoon from the breakfast tray to hold down his patient's tongue. He used the mirror as a reflector. The back of the throat and the tonsils were slightly inflamed.

"Any cough?"

"No."

"Feel all right?"

"Drowsy."

Farady produced a thermometer. The temperature was barely a point above normal.

"Probably a chill. Better stop in bed this morning. I won't go out."

"Were you going out?"

Farady explained.

"Well now, look here, that is important," said Ascherer. "It would be disastrous if anything went wrong with Warrant's sight at this stage of the business. You go. I shall be all right,"

"You're sure?"

Ascherer moved his head testily.

“Yes, of course. Nothing irritates me so much as people who say ‘Are you sure?’ and one has to reply ‘Yes’ and then it starts all over again. Go on—get off with you.”

Richenda and Rentyen were waiting in the hall when Farady came down.

“Mr. Rentyen says he will drive us to Nice in his car. Isn’t it kind of him?” she said.

Farady had his own views about that. He expressed his gratitude in an appropriate frown. The frown increased when Rentyen’s car was delivered at the door. It was one of those long, low, open, wind-swept two-seaters, with a sheeted-in pit for luggage or a drunk at the back. Farady knew at once where he was going to sit, and was not mistaken.

Rentyen took them round the hair-pin bend at the top of the village at a resonant sixty. Thereabouts Farady lost his hat.

“Better without it,” Rentyen said.

He appeared to be in high fettle. As they sped along the Corniche, he pointed to a little restaurant with pillars and a wooden terrace which projected over a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more. He told them it was Le Vistaero and bade them forget it not.

“The place is bewitched. A natural love philtre. If ever you are uncertain if you love anybody or not go to Le Vistaero, and you’ll know.”

Farady shouted:

"I shan't have to go there."

Rentyen ignored him.

"I discovered it as a fact years ago. I told an old couple about it who were lunching there and they laughed at me. They said they had been married twenty-seven years. An hour later I caught them with their arms twined round each other's necks—kissing. A fact. The place is enchanted."

Farady felt that if anybody had to tell Richenda stories about kissing couples he would prefer to do so himself. He could not honestly pretend to have enjoyed the drive and was heartily thankful when the car pulled up before Warrant's house in the Rue des Petits Champs.

The street in which it was situated was a tenuous affair, which started pretentiously from a point near the quay and diminished in importance as it progressed towards the hill.

Clive Warrant occupied number 17, an ochre-washed villa of three storeys. A vine of *Bougainvillaea* wept wine-dark tears over the front wall. The villa was approached through a small square garden which, at the caprice of a prevailing wind was the natural repository for old newspapers, cigarette wrappers, leaves and dust.

The door was opened by a *bonne* who had looked after Warrant for many years; a curious, distraught old body who was always in a panic about something or another. Recognising Richenda she threw up her hands to heaven.

"Ah, mais vous êtes bien arrivé. *Le Maître il est terrible ce matin ! Il est sauvage comme un ours.*"

"Is he? *Vraiment?*" said Richenda, and aside to Farady, "What is an *ours*?"

Farady had no idea. Rentyen said:

"A bear, I think."

Madame nodded vigorously.

"*Oui, oui, c'est ça.* A bear of the sore head. *Il guette toujours le facteur—toujours.*"

Warrant's voice descended from the floor above.

"Who's that? Is that the postman? Why am I never told. . . ."

Warrant's heavy footsteps clattered down the stairs to the hall. He looked dishevelled and his eyes were red and wild. Richenda said:

"Good morning, father."

He waved her aside and confronted Farady.

"Ah, you! You're the one. You're no good—useless—so much waste material. I suppose you are going to say you have brought it, but is that what I asked? No."

"This would be easier," said Farady, "if you told me what it is I am supposed to have brought."

Clive Warrant stamped a foot on the echoing floor-boards.

"The envelope. Don't be a fool. You'll say next that you never had it."

"Oh that. I gave the envelope with the sketches to Mr. Ascherer."

"Then where are they?" The voice pitched up hysterically.

“He posted them back to you, as he said he would. I saw the servant going down the drive.”

Clive Warrant wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and threw his arms about with jointless gestures.

“Can’t trust a soul—not one soul. All my work held up. Precious time . . .” He covered his eyes and gave a sort of angry sob.

“Dear,” said Richenda, “it’ll be sure to come by the next post.”

Warrant turned on her savagely:

“Why do I have to be bothered by floods of people pouring in on me? Why can’t I be left alone?”

This was more than Farady could stand. He did not mind for himself, but he would not tolerate having Richenda roared at. He said:

“I should think there are very good reasons for leaving you alone. We are sorry about your sketches, but apart from that . . .”

Warrant cut him short.

“Say no more.” He looked from one to the other and made a visible effort to pull himself together. “The sketches are of no importance whatsoever. None. But when I arrange everything most carefully there is no excuse for mistakes to be made.”

“Father,” said Richenda, “as you won’t be able to work just yet, I wish you’d let us take you along to see somebody about your eyes. There’s a very good man called Ruamont and . . .”

Warrant said:

“Who is us?”

“Dr. Farady and me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of inconveniencing either of you.”

“Father!”

Rentyen plucked Farady’s sleeve.

“Why not let me try and handle him? I’m used to the artistic temperament.”

“Think he’d go with you?”

“I can have a shot.”

“No harm trying.”

Aloud Rentyen said:

“That Corniche road is dusty. Feel like giving me a drink, Warrant?”

Clive Warrant became instantly human.

“My dear fellar, is the sun over the yard-arm? It must be. Come along to my room.”

Rentyen held up one finger like a man inspired.

“Better still. Let me run you along to a café I stumbled on the other day. They have an Armagnac which, if I know anything, is the real stuff.”

Warrant put a hand on Rentyen’s shoulder.

“I shan’t want a hat,” he said.

They went out together, Warrant blinking and swaying in the strong sunlight. Farady nodded towards them.

“I suppose that’s what is called personal magnetism.”

There were bruises in Richenda’s eyes and she was biting her lip.

“Doesn’t it make you feel rather a failure? It does me. Why does he treat me like a stranger?”

Farady did not reply, for his opinion of Warrant's treatment of Richenda was best expressed in silence. There was a telephone in the hall and he moved towards it.

"I'll give Doctor Ruamont a call and ask him to stand by. But it won't surprise me if Rentyen never succeeds in getting him there."

2.

But Rentyen did succeed.

He had his own methods of persuasion; and they were subtle. It was said of him in the theatre that he could get anybody to do anything if he cared to take the trouble. Sometimes he jollied them. Sometimes he bullied. Sometimes he entered deeply and sympathetically into the recesses of their own minds. His methods were stunts, but they worked.

They worked on the present occasion. Nothing was further from Warrant's mind than visiting an oculist, yet, within half an hour, he was climbing the stairs to Ruamont's consulting-room with the air of a man following his own inclination.

Rentyen had said:

"By nature I'm such a coward. I would always rather *not* know if anything is the matter with me. Once I asked a fellar in Harley Street if he would tell me frankly in the event of his finding I had a growth of any kind. He said he would. Well, I couldn't

grab my hat and coat fast enough. That's why I envy fellars who have your kind of nerve."

Clive Warrant puffed out his chest like a pigeon and emptied his glass of brandy.

"What was this chap's name? Ruamont? Let's go and look him up."

And they went.

M. Ruamont was engaged at the moment of their arrival and they were invited to wait by a young lady receptionist, who looked as if she would have been more at home at a *Thé Dansant*. She twinkled them into a sort of parlour, with a tartan-clothed table in the centre and a wall-paper depicting black magnolias sprawling across a golden trellis, superimposed upon a background of prune-coloured night. A Bokhara rug, a few pieces of furniture upholstered in pink brocade, and a pair of yellow brocade curtains completed the decorations and inspired Warrant to remark that there was much to be said in favour of blindness.

On the centre table was a copy of *La Vie Parisienne*, some throwaways of the *Messageries Maritimes*, and, presumably for the entertainment of English patrons, a time-yellowed copy of the *Badminton Magazine*, dated 1899, and a Postal Guide for West Kensington of the same decade.

Rentyen smiled over these exhibits and announced them in detail.

"Why on earth should an oculist provide literature of this kind?"

"I can only suppose," said Warrant, heavily, "they

are there to prevent patients from reading." He rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I shan't wait for this fellow if he is very much longer. Ah, here comes our little soubrette."

The smiling receptionist was standing in the doorway.

"*Messieurs, s'il vous plaît !*"

The consulting-room presented a more formal appearance. There was an imposing array of optometrical instruments. In one corner was an illuminated screen bearing a procession of letters in varying sizes. With its back to the window was a kind of dentist's chair with a tray of lenses beside it. The walls were black.

M. Ruamont was washing his hands as they came in. He was a small man with a very large head and a false-looking moustache. His skin was yellowish-white and, like many other Frenchmen, he looked as if he had never been out of doors. He dried his hands on a paper towel, dropped it into a wire basket. Having greeted his visitors with a sombre pleasantry, he seated himself at his desk and laid a history-sheet *pro forma* on the blotter before him.

"And so it is," he said, "that we begin."

As Warrant slumped into a chair facing him he plunged one of those curious offside nibbed pens into the ink-pot and harpooned a black, fungoid growth from its base. Apparently this was not expected, for he wiped the nib on the underside of the lapel of his coat and got to work.

Clive Warrant did not make the task an easy one. A statement of facts was at all times a source of irritation to him and he was unable to answer such simple questions as the date of his birth and inquiries relative to any maladies from which he had suffered in the past without indulging in a string of interminable irrelevancies. At one period of the interrogation he diverged so far as to deliver an address on the almost countless varieties of bacteria which could be introduced into a vessel of sterilised lard by the simple process of sneezing over it.

"I don't know whether you are aware," he proceeded . . .

But M. Ruamont had risen.

"Probably I am not. Let us proceed to our inquiries."

He marshalled Warrant into the chair by the window and lowered the blind. In the sudden darkness the lettered screen assumed a ghostly character.

Rentyen shivered. Until that moment he had thought the entertainment excellent. Indeed he was seriously considering the introduction of some such similar scene into a comedy which he had recently acquired. But with this unexpected darkness a sense of impending tragedy had entered the room. He watched Ruamont bending over his patient with a tiny torch and glass. By the light of the torch Warrant's bloodshot eyes looked like stagnant pools infested by myriads of red wire-worms.

Warrant too must have been conscious of the gloomy

atmosphere, for he was humming some kind of tuneless measure to keep his spirits up.

“Baa—baa—boom—boom—baaaa!”

Ruamont stepped back and looked at him in silence. Then he laid aside the torch.

“And now, Monsieur, ze lettaires on ze screen. You will read zem for me—aloud. Ze top row.”

Warrant screwed up his features, stared and shook his head.

“No, no. They make no sense. I couldn’t be bothered.”

“Monsieur, please.”

“Oh, ver’ well. B-O-L-O-N-E-Y. Boloney!”

Actually the letters were TZLAFES.

Rentyen thought:

“Not too good. He wouldn’t have said that if he’d been able to read them.” Then, as a rider to the thought: “I suppose I can see ‘em all right? Hope so.”

He tried with first one eye and then the other. He was going well when the screen went black and a small electric coil started buzzing and humming in a corner beyond. Below the picture-rail a tiny purple light flickered.

“Now, here is a light, Monsieur Warrant. What is ze colour of him?”

Warrant’s voice came back as from the bowels of the earth.

“Curious you should ask me that. For that light—that colour—and colour is a subject on which I’m

rather an authority—that colour is one that artists call aureolin yellow."

From Rentyen came a startled:

"No."

"Monsieur, please!"

"Sorry," said Rentyen, and thought: "My God, suppose it is yellow!"

He was conscious of a germ of panic. The light spot changed to a vivid green.

"Green," he shouted.

M. Ruamont touched him on the arm.

"My friend, I do not make zis test for you. It is to Monsieur Warrant I ask ze question."

Rentyen dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief. His nerves were in no state to stand very much more of this. It was all he could do to prevent himself shrieking when Warrant said:

"The poor chap is colour-blind. Obviously blue—sapphire blue."

"*Très, très bien!* And once again."

This time Rentyen did not dare to look. He heard Warrant's confident announcement: "Pink," and the buzzer cease to buzz. Then the blind went up with a roar and sunlight came into the room.

M. Ruamont went back to his table and Warrant lit a cigarette. M. Ruamont watched him light it. He seemed in no hurry. Rentyen felt that the silence was interminable. He knew that it was not his cue to speak but he could not resist the temptation.

"All very satisfactory, Doctor?"

M. Ruamont ignored the question. He addressed another question to Warrant:

“You smoke a great many cigarettes, *hein?*”

“No, I wouldn’t say so.”

“No? And you do not drink to—er—excess?”

Warrant pondered deeply before replying:

“I drink very moderately.”

Ruamont frowned.

“So. That is strange. May I have ze extent of zis moderation?”

“How much I actually do drink?”

“*Précisément.*”

Warrant caressed his chin as an aid to thought.

“A couple of cocktails in the course of the day. A glass of beer at lunch. Whisky and soda—bed.”

“And zat is all?”

“Occasionally a cognac, perhaps.”

“Hm! Zat is indeed very moderate.”

Clive Warrant rose and held out a hand.

“I’m much obliged to you, Doctor. Whole thing splendid. Mos’ satisfactory.”

Ruamont did not take the hand.

“You have no desire, Monsieur, to hear my diagnosis?”

Warrant waved a hand in the air.

“Whole thing mos’ satisfactory!” he repeated.

It was then that Rentyen spoke.

“Look here, Warrant, why not treat the Doctor as a pal? He’s a good sort. I’m certain he’ll understand.”

Warrant scowled.

“But there’s nothing to understand.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Rentyen insisted. “There’s your smoking, for one thing. You are never without a cigarette in your mouth.”

Warrant gave a shrug of unwilling assent. He said: “I simply don’t notice.”

“Then about drinks,” Rentyen went on. “I know what you drink because—well because I suppose I lower very much the same number myself.”

There was not a vestige of truth in that, but he felt it would be easier for Warrant if his confession was made in the presence of a fellow-sinner. It cannot be said that he was in any way prepared for Warrant’s reception of this admission.

Warrant looked at him with an expression of benevolent regret, and said:

“I hadn’t liked to mention it, but as you have done so, I have thought for some time that you have been drinking a great deal too much. Struck me as rather a pity.”

The almost indetectable twinkle in Ruamont’s eyes aided Rentyen to accept the rebuke with humility. He bowed his head and nodded.

“Thanks, Warrant. You’re a damned good chap.”

Then Ruamont spoke:

“Monsieur Rentyen, perhaps you would consent to tell me ze exact number of drinks you have in ze day.”

Rentyen filled his lungs.

“Here goes! I don’t always have one before breakfast—only sometimes, but there is a moment—some-

time before midday, when the sun goes over the yard-arm."

Warrant held up a hand.

"I had forgotten the yard-arm," he admitted.

"After that," Rentyen went on—and there followed in chronological order a staggering procession of gins and brandies and whiskies which travelled far into the night.

Ruamont said:

"I sank you. You have told me what I desire to know. And now, M. Warrant, I must tell you what no man would desire to know. My friend, wiz alcohol and nicotine you have poisoned, and all but paralysed, your optic nerve. If you desire to retain your sight, your one chance is to smoke no more and drink no more. I cannot tell you for certain zat you have not come to me too late. But zere is a chance for you if you shall do what I say. Ze saving is in your own hand. If you go on as now you will be blind. Blind as are the stones."

Rentyen was standing and it seemed to him that he heard this awful sentence with his knees. They shook so violently that he clung to a chair for support. He was amazed to observe that Warrant appeared to accept it as a matter of trifling importance. He was lighting another cigarette with an unusually steady hand. The flame of the match did not flicker.

"Then all I must do is neither to smoke nor drink?"

"Just so." Ruamont lent forward, took the cigarette from his fingers and stubbed it out. "Just zat little

refrainment, Monsieur. And I trust zat you will find it as easy to do as it is to say. You will take a Turkish bath every day for a fortnight. You will visit me again ze fifteens of ze munce. *Au'voir et bonne chance.*"

Clive Warrant went out of the room with the dignity of a battleship. Rentyen lingered. Nervously he whispered:

"Is this—I mean—you weren't trying to frighten him?"

Ruamont shook his head in a way that left no room for doubt.

"God, though! What an awful thing. But can a few drinks and some cigarettes . . .? No, don't bother. Don't tell me." He hurried out in pursuit of Warrant, who was waiting on the pavement outside the house, blinking at the sunlight.

"Old chap!" he said, and patted Warrant's arm. "Dear old chap! My God, you were splendid. If any man ever deserved a medal . . ."

Warrant waved him into silence.

"What I deserve, and what I mean to have, is a very large gin and bitters."

Rentyen was aghast.

"But my dear fellar, you can't have understood!"

Warrant gestured with a thumb in the direction of the house.

"Fellar was a charlatan."

"But suppose he wasn't? I mean, think! Never again to see the . . ."

"The things I love turned to dust. Vice and

treachery triumphant. That café over the road! Let's go there."

Rentyen shook his head.

"I feel I shall never touch another drink as long as I live."

"Ah, but you have something to live for."

Careless of the traffic Clive Warrant plunged into the roadway.

3.

It was Richenda's suggestion that she and Farady should sit in the porch until Rentyen and her father returned. Richenda showed no disposition to talk. She sat with her chin on her breast; her attention apparently absorbed by the highlights on the points of her shoes.

Presently Farady could bear the silence no longer.

"I'm sorry I wasn't very tactful, but, father or no father, he had no right to talk to you as he did."

"It hadn't occurred to you that he is a sick man?"

"He may be, but whose fault is that?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Miles, does a man drink as he's been drinking for—for pleasure?"

"Many do."

She frowned a little.

"That wasn't the right answer."

"You want me to say I think he does so because he's unhappy?"

"But mayn't that be the reason? He was a man with the world at his feet."

"Plenty of that sort have gone his way. It's as if they can't carry the load."

Richenda's head went from side to side.

"Oh, I don't know. It seems so pitiful."

He drew his chair nearer to hers.

"Richenda, do you love your father?"

She did not reply at once. Then:

"I want to, but he makes it so difficult—impossible."

"Then, why try? From what I've heard he hasn't done a damned thing for you since you were five years old. You wouldn't dream of trying to make any other man love you. Pride wouldn't let you."

She raised her head and looked him in the eyes.

"Why are you saying this to me?"

"Because I'm fond of you—much too fond to let you take a toss you could avoid."

"What sort of toss?"

"It isn't very attractive for any woman—wife, daughter or sweetheart—to have an offer of love turned down."

An expression of pain came into Richenda's face.

"You mean, as he would turn down my offer?"

Farady nodded.

"That's just what I do mean."

"But why should he?"

"That's impossible to answer. When a man is soaked with drink as he is, his likes, dislikes and everything about him are utterly illogical. If you

don't want to hurt yourself more than you've been hurt, I'd chuck it—honestly I would. Certain prejudices, like certain diseases, can't be cured."

Richenda's cheeks coloured, and in her eyes there was an expression of contempt.

"You advise me to pass the buck? What a fine doctor you must be—and what a friend."

"I was prepared for that," he answered. "It would be too much to expect anybody in this particular galley of ours to credit another with a decent motive. I've met nothing but suspicion and hatred and abuse since I arrived at La Peruse. I'm sorry that you had to be infected with the same germ."

Richenda put a hand to her mouth.

"That isn't fair. You've no right to speak that way to me."

"A man who is in love with a girl has every right to protect her from harm and misery and disappointment. If you weren't a complete fool you'd be the first to admit it."

"Well," gasped Richenda. "You're a fine one to talk about abuse. Gee! I didn't know men in love used such terrible language. I suppose the next thing will be a clout on the head."

Miles Farady leaned over and took both her hands in his.

"Let's have a pact to stick together, Richenda. It's in my head that something, I don't know what, is going to happen. I do want you to feel . . . Now who's this?"

The garden gate was pushed open and a small, round man with a red perspiring face came puffing up the stone walk. He was wearing a straw hat of the boater type, circled with a ribbon of several colours. In his hand he carried a string bag containing a bottle and a parcel of sandwiches. On seeing Richenda he removed his hat and burnished the top of his head with a coloured handkerchief.

“Noomber seventeen?” he asked in a rich Yorkshire accent.

Richenda nodded and he addressed himself to Farady.

“Would the name be Clive Warrant, b’any chance?”

“No, I’m Dr. Farady. But this is Miss Warrant.”

The little man smiled agreeably.

“Seems funny to find an English doctor in these parts. Sort of ‘omelike. Well, I expect you’re wondering who I am. My name’s Waring. It’s a funny coincidence a Waring and a Warrant in t’same street, isn’t it? That mus’ be ‘ow mistake occurred.” He foraged in his pocket and drew forth a long envelope, which Farady at once recognised. “Yer see t’postman left this at my lodgings and, casual like, thinking it was meant fer me, I thumbed it open. It wasn’t until I saw pictures inside I knew t’was for somebody else.”

Richenda said:

“Father’s sketches. He will be relieved.”

“If I’d looked a bit more careful I wouldn’t ‘ve made the error. But you can see fer yerself that the

noomber seventeen might joost as well be seventy-seven."

Richenda said:

"Why so it might. His pencil must have slipped. How nice of you to bring it along."

"Don't name it. Matter of fac' it's joost as it came. I didn't even tear envelope. T'flap come open under my thumb and I licked it up all tidy and Bristol fashion."

Farady said:

"It's very kind of you to have taken so much trouble, Mr. Waring. A lot of people would have thrown it away."

Mr. Waring seemed in no hurry to go.

"Oh t'was no trouble, young man, 'n' I got plenty o' time these days—too mooch, between ourselves. Aye, my poor missus was took las' November. She 'ad 'oped to stay over Christmas but it wasn't no good. Her noomber was oop and she 'ad to answer the call. Things 'aven't been the same since she answered it; 'n' it's no good saying otherwise. It's something crool the way I've pined for 'er. Taken the 'eart right out of me it 'as. When she was livin' I'd go off to football as 'appy as a grig. But now I'd joost as lief stop at 'ome. A rare follower of football I've always been, too. These is our colours," and he touched the ribbon on his hat. "I reckon it was stopping too mooch at 'ome that started my bronchitis—and the bronchitis was the cause of me coomin' out 'ere."

"Oh, you poor dear!" said Richenda. "I do hope you're better and are having a happy time."

"Aye I'm a lot better, but 'appy times is all be'ind me. Not that I can grumble. I've 'ad a good innings. But some'ow I don't take to foreign places and foreign ways. You get these fresh bits of skirt flashing their eyes at you, and exposin' of themselves on t'beach, but it don't mean a thing ter me. No, give me my chair before fire and missus asleep in 'ers oppersite 'n' I'd change places wi' no man. But since them things is gorn the sooner I go after'm t'better for all concerned."

Richenda said:

"I suppose you wouldn't like to come out with me one day. I can borrow a car and we might go to Grasse or somewhere."

Mr. Waring chuckled delightedly.

"Aye, 'n' that's about all I'm fit for, to be put out to grass. It was a kindly thought, but let youth stick to youth, Miss Warrant; that's my motto. Well, good day to you both. I'm a terror to talk once I get started. Good day—good day."

He shuffled down the path and stopped.

"There is one thing, though. If trouble in my ches' was to return, p'raps Doctor wouldn't mind 'aving a look at it. I can't bring meself to troost these 'ere foreigners."

"Yes, of course I will," said Farady. "Drop me a line to La Peruse, Rocquebrune. Or telephone. The name would be Ascherer in the book."

Mr. Waring's eyes opened wide.

"Paul Ascherert 'millionaire?'"

"That's the chap."

"My word 'n' all!" And Mr. Waring went from the garden shaking his head and clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"That was a first-class fellar," said Farady. "Real salt of the earth."

"You're telling me?" Richenda replied and there was moisture in her eyes. "The poor darling. He turned down my offer in no uncertain way." Her expression clouded and she looked at Farady. "It almost bears out what you were saying, doesn't it?"

"In no way whatsoever," he replied generously.

Richenda said:

"If you won't even let a person agree with you!"

But she liked him none the less for that.

#### 4.

It was past noon when Rentyen and Warrant returned. Farady saw at once that they had been drinking. The manner in which they extricated themselves from the car was conducted with mutual assistance and mutual perils. Arm in arm they entered the garden and tacked across the patch of grass towards Richenda and Farady. Drink had affected each man in a different way. With Warrant its influences had been benign and soporific. Long experience had instructed him in the art of mingling alcohol and

strong sunlight without materially increasing his mental confusion. It was obvious that Rentyen was the more afflicted. In the ordinary way he seldom drank anything until sundown, and then only in moderation. The noonday binge, into which Warrant had impressed him, had had the effect of distorting his sense of reference, of ungoverning his vocal registers and of playing havoc with his steering gear. In short he was in a state in which he knew not what he said; how he said it; where he was, or why.

When he found himself in the café he had been distressed beyond measure at Warrant's reckless disregard of Ruamont's warning. To him it was a frightful thing for a man wantonly to imperil the gift of sight; at the same time he could not but admire Warrant's indifference to his fate. He overlooked the fact that such indifference probably found its source in a weakness of character that could not shake off the enslavement of the bottle even for its own advantage and salvation. Clive Warrant had struck a posture in which, crazy though it was, there was something heroic; and it was as a tribute to that heroism that Rentyen raised and lowered the first of a long procession of White Ladies.

During the return journey it was only with the utmost difficulty that he contrived to handle the car and avoid a number of collisions. He had little or no idea where he was or where he was going, and but for Warrant's captaincy he would never have succeeded in reaching the villa in the Rue des Petits Champs.

Warrant had bought from a flower vendor some choice carnations and with these, in a paper cone, he waved and signalled the course to be followed. The gestures employed in so doing were more violent than the needs of the occasion and resulted in distributing the carnations in ones and twos upon the highway. When they arrived at the villa the last of the flowers had vanished and only the paper cone remained.

Not until Rentyen saw the look in Richenda's eyes was he oppressed by doubts as to the manner in which he had carried out his mission. Until that moment he had been abiding in an artificial paradise where every man and every condition was good, and it was depressing to realise that in actual fact the whole affair was a calamity.

In an effort to appear at ease he sought to lift a non-existent hat, and dropped into a deck-chair which collapsed beneath him.

"OurfrenRenchen—notimself," said Warrant, thickly, and added: "Farfromwell—ver-ver-very-seedy."

But this Rentyen would not allow. He spoke reassuringly from the wreckage of the chair.

"Never better. Fit—fit as a flea!" His smile became a sudden frown and he started to pick up and drop words as if they were bits of burning coal. "But it's thick—too thick when men—claiming-to-be-doctors—do their best to try—to lie. . . . At least . . . I think so—who wouldn't?"

Farady said:

"Then you saw Ruamont?"

Warrant held up a hand like a traffic policeman. In a growling monotone he recited:

“ Th’ once was a doctor call’ Ruamont  
Who fell in th’ battle of Douamont.”

Rentyen cried out:

“ Shut up, do you hear? Shut up!”

Warrant looked at him dazedly. He asked:

“ D’int it happen then?”

Rentyen said:

“ Whole thing absurd—grotesque!”

Warrant was with him there.

“ Fantastic—fan—phantasmagorical.”

And suddenly Richenda pressed a hand to her mouth and with a stifled sob ran into the house and up the stairs. There was a sofa in her father’s work-room and she threw herself upon it and began to cry. She had not been crying long when she heard her father’s footsteps slouching up the stairs. As he climbed he was singing one of his “Baa-boo-baa” songs with great depth of voice and feeling.

He did not notice her as he came into the room, but stood inside the door twiddling the envelope, that Mr. Waring had brought, in his long sensitive fingers. He ceased the singing and Richenda noticed from the changing expression of his face that he was making an effort to control thought. The effort resolved itself into action as he turned his head in the direction of rather a feeble fire that burnt in the grate.

"Ah, jusso! Thassit!" he murmured, and with a gesture surprisingly deliberate and accurate, tossed the envelope on to the flames, spun round perilously, and stumped from the room.

Richenda had been too astonished to speak and it was not until he had gone that she sprang to her feet and went down on her knees before the grate. One end of the envelope had caught, but there was still a chance of saving the contents. Richenda snatched it from the fire and beat out the flames against the bars.

It was obvious, of course, that Warrant was drunk; but, even so, she could conceive of no reason why he should destroy an object about which he had concerned himself so anxiously an hour or two before. It made no sense to presume that he merely wanted the envelope for the purpose of putting it on the fire. It contained sketches for *Paradis sur Mer* and unless he had come to a sudden resolution to have nothing more to do with the scheme, there could be no excuse for burning them.

Richenda asked herself what she had better do. In his present mood, where everything was distorted, it would be useless to tackle him on the subject or admit that she had rescued the sketches from the fire. The wisest course appeared to be to keep them herself and return them when he was in a better condition to know what he was doing. With this resolve Richenda removed the charred edges, folded the envelope and put it in her bag.

Meanwhile, in the garden, Farady was putting Rentyen on the grill.

"Rentyen, can you sober up enough to tell me what's been going on?"

No man alive was more sensitive to an inflexion than Napier Rentyen. Farady's ice-hard tones cut into his consciousness like a knife. He pressed his fingers to his temples and fought manfully to resist the seductions of the White Ladies.

"Terribly sorry—I'm stinking and I know it. Give me a second."

"You saw Ruamont?"

"Yes, saw him. Bloody business. Horrible!"

"What did he say?"

"Paralysed optic nerve—drink smoking. Cut it right out or total blindness."

Farady whistled.

"I was afraid of that. Well, and then?"

"We went on a jag. Pitiful, eh?"

"Not too good. Warrant will never cut it out."

"Not a chance. Any need to tell Miss—er—too tight to remember names—the daughter?"

"That's what I was wondering."

"I shouldn't. Where's the use? Sweet girl like that."

Farady said:

"I'd rather you waited to sing her praises until you're sober."

Rentyen made a gesture of acknowledgment.

"Yes. Merited. Sorry."

“That’s all right.”

“Wouldn’t have got this way only whole business rather shock. Couldn’t help saying to myself ‘There, but for the grace of God . . .’”

“I know.”

“It was pretty ghastly when the little lights came on and Warrant kept giving them the wrong colours.”

Farady smiled. He was reasonably good at reading people’s minds.

“Made you wonder if they were the wrong colours, eh?”

“Yes. You’ve hit it. Sweated all over I did.”

Farady said:

“We shall have to tell her something. She isn’t the kind of girl to fall for a bluff. She’ll want to see the cards.”

Rentyen looked at him beseechingly.

“You’ll leave me out old son? I’m too drunk to tell anybody anything, aren’t I? You can see I am.”

“Wind up?”

“Hate hurting people—nice people.”

“Hm! But won’t she wonder how I know anything about it if you were unable to tell me?”

Rentyen moaned. Then he had an idea.

“You could telephone Ruamont.”

Farady nodded.

“Neatly extricated, eh? Full marks for that. I’ll call him now.”

“Fine. Well good-bye.”

“Why good-bye?”

"Don't be a fool. I'm going to pass out before she comes down again. I'm taking no chances." And Rentyen's chin slumped on his breast.

Farady went into the house smiling rather grimly. He had finished talking to Ruamont and was hanging up the receiver as Richenda came down the stairs. He asked:

"How is he?"

"Asleep. I want to talk to Mr. Rentyen."

"You can't—not yet."

She understood and rubbed her forehead with the back of a hand.

"It's all rather disgusting. Who were you calling?"

"Ruamont. Your father will have to ease up on drinks. They are doing his eyes no good."

"Does drink affect the eyes?"

"It can. Drink and too much smoke."

Richenda said:

"How serious is this?"

"It might be serious."

Richenda threw up a hand.

"Then that was why he burned the envelope."

"What are you talking about?"

She told him.

"But I still don't see why he should want to burn it."

"I do. That wretched Ruamont must have frightened him. He thought his eyes were going to be bad—so bad that he wouldn't be able to work. He must have thrown the sketches on the fire in a panic."

"Hm! Well, perhaps you're right. We'd better be getting along."

He put a hand on her arm but Richenda hung back.

"Miles, I ought to stay with him."

"He'll be asleep most of the day. You can return any time. It's only an hour's run."

She let herself be led into the garden.

Rentyen's performance of a man who had passed out was one of those perfect pieces of artistry which conceal art. Indeed art and nature had united and he was asleep. Farady picked him up and dumped him in that section of the car reserved for drunks and luggage.

## 5.

Colonel Culver had breakfasted in bed. He had eaten porridge, a kipper, two sausages and bacon, and some raspberry jam. He regretted the raspberry jam because some of the pips had got under the plate of his new dentures. That would mean that the dentures would have to come out again and it was a long and painful process putting them in. The dentist who had supplied them had revealed a peculiar knack for performing this delicate operation which Culver had not yet acquired. It depended on getting one of the clips round an existing eye-tooth, then with an inward and upward rotary movement snapping the plate into position. To the initiated the operation was quite a pleasant one, but to the uninitiated it was a

purgatorial experience, accompanied not only by sensations of self-imposed lock-jaw, but by all the preliminaries of nausea. Culver had been through it once that morning and had no wish to repeat the experiment. In consequence he determined to leave the raspberry pips where they were, and accept them as one more irritation and annoyance in an existence which appeared to offer nothing but irritations and annoyances.

Staying in bed was not a practice to which Culver was addicted. It bored him exceedingly. He liked to be out and about and bustling around. He would have been out and about but for Rentyen. He was stopping in bed for the sole reason that he did not feel mentally capable of meeting Rentyen until the day and his temper were a little more aired. Were he to meet Rentyen, and were Rentyen to indulge in another witticism at his expense he knew that he would not be able to control himself. In fine, something would have to go, and he was fairly sure that that something would be his fist and its objective would be Rentyen's nose.

All through the night his fist had been behaving in a most unruly fashion. It had been telegraphing messages to his brain to inquire what it had done to have had its natural impulses thus neglected. It had been totally unable to understand why, for reasons of diplomacy, it had been called upon to open up and present all the features of a hand of friendship.

There was no getting away from the fact that Culver

had spent a miserable night. His mind had been torn by doubts, hatreds and anxieties. Not once, though he strove to call her, had the phantom Venice entered and held him in her embrace. Rentyen had killed that dream romance just as surely as Ascherer's threat had abolished every hope of it ever being realised in the flesh.

Culver shook out a morning paper and scanned the market quotations. The stock controlled by Ascherer's group appeared to be holding up all right, but, then of course, there had not been time for Ascherer to start any funny business.

"Not that he ever would," thought Culver. "Paul's bark is worse than his bite. He wouldn't do anything that would lose money for himself. Not a chance. I was angry last night and so was he. That's all there was to it. Ten to one he's forgotten all about it this morning. Wonder what he'd say if I told him I'd changed my mind about *Paradis* and am ready to come in on it. Better to drop a bit over that than find myself squeezed out in other directions."

He leaned over to touch the bell. The infernal push was just out of comfortable reach. He leaned still further and something collapsed under his weight. The hot-water bottle—a thing he never used and heartily detested. He had shoved it right over on the side of the bed to get it out of the way. And now it had burst. He and the bed were awash. He snapped his teeth wolfishly and one of the pips pierced his gum like a thorn. "Hell!"

He sprang from the bed like a man possessed. A *valet de chambre* came in.

“Monsieur ring?”

“Yes, I’m getting up. That damned bottle has flooded the bed. Filthy mess—soaked to the skin. Exasperating. I’m not a baby to be cluttered up with bottles. Have these pyjamas properly dried and everything else.”

He cast his wet pyjamas on to the floor.

“*Bien, M’sieur.*”

“Then get on with it. Here, where are you? Come back. Has Mr. Ascherer gone out?”

“*Non.* Monsieur is not so well. ‘E stays the bed.”

Culver swung round and looked at the valet searchingly.

“Hm! Unlike him. Send a message to say I’ll be along to see him in a few minutes.”

“Pardon, M’sieur, a leetle more than few meeneets.”

“What the devil are you talking about?”

“M’sieur say not to be disturbed for half-hour. He talk on ze telephone to ze brokaires in Londres.”

A cold wind seemed to pass across Culver’s naked body. He crossed to the window and slammed it. On the terrace was Venice. He did not need to wonder for whom she was waiting. Over his shoulder he rapped a question.

“Where’s Mr. Rentyen?”

“He go in hees car wiz Mees Warrant to Nice, M’sieur.”

"Ho! Does he—does he?"

"Pardon, M'sieur?"

"Get out."

Culver dressed with haste and went down to the terrace. Venice was still there. She was not reading and did not appear to be thinking. With statuary she possessed an ability for doing nothing gracefully.

Culver approached, clapping his hands and uttering a brisk good morning.

Venice did not like loud noises and her eyes flinched at the clapping. She said, with a hint of reproach:

"I was watching two little birds in that mimosa, and you have frightened them away."

Culver's laugh seemed to suggest that it needed a good man to do a job like that.

"When I was a lad on my father's place in Australia one of my jobs was to scare the birds."

"I'm sure you did it very well," said Venice.

It was the first time she had praised him and he felt the better for it.

"I dare say. Never thought much about it. Sulphur-crested parrots they were. A regular plague. You're looking very fresh this morning, very fresh!"

Venice said:

"Don't I usually?"

Culver held up his hand in a gesture of protest.

"My dear lady! My dear, dear lady!"

He stopped abruptly with the realisation that they were right beneath Paul Ascherer's room and the windows were open. In the circumstances it would

be politic to subdue the enthusiasm in his voice. He said in ringing tones:

“I’m very sorry to hear that Paul is not himself this morning—very sorry.”

Venice ran a finger-tip over her profile and down her neck.

“Yes. I wonder why people are always supposed not to be themselves just because they happen to be in bed.”

Culver cleared his throat. He was not quite certain whether she was laughing at him.

“Well, it’s only a figure of speech. Not intended to be taken literally.”

Venice said:

“What fun one can have with speech. One can turn it into little figures and do the absurdest things. I think Napier Rentyen uses speech more amusingly than anybody I know.”

So she was laughing at him. Right, he would give her something to laugh at. He said:

“If flippancy and instability are amusing I’m inclined to agree with you.”

“I think they are.”

“Personally I haven’t much time for that sort of trash. I prefer a man to be a man.”

“But he needn’t be stodgy to be a man, do you think? I can imagine a man being utterly light-headed and irresponsible and yet quite willing to fight for whatever it might be.”

Culver felt the blood rush to his neck and cheeks.

There was no room to doubt the underlying meaning of her words. The damned fellow had told her what had occurred last night. Well, he should pay for doing that, and in no uncertain coin.

"You may say this is no business of mine," he said, "but in my opinion friendship isn't worth a hill of beans unless it has the honesty to speak its mind."

"And just what is on its mind?" asked Venice with dangerous sweetness.

Culver cleared his throat noisily.

"You have in this house a young and inexperienced girl who . . ."

"If you mean my maid Marie . . ."

"I don't. I mean Miss Warrant."

Venice said:

"It was very quick of you to find out that she is so inexperienced; however, what about it?"

"Just this. A hostess in a sort of way is in a position of *loco parentis* . . ."

Venice cut in:

"There you are! That's just what I meant about speech! You can twist it into knots—throw it about all over the Continent . . ."

Culver's voice thundered over her.

"If I were that girl's mother I'd think twice before turning her loose with a libertine like Rentyen about the place. Give that a thought. Perhaps you didn't know that he's carried her off to Nice in his car? Well, that's just what he has done. And while we're on the subject let me add this. It is common know-

ledge, in the theatre world of London, that no woman in his company is safe."

If he expected Venice to blanch before these fearful charges he must have been grievously disappointed. A little smile was dancing like a waterfly all over her face.

"It is possible they may not want to be," she said.

And at that moment a voice descended upon them from the air above.

"Richard, come up to my room at once."

Venice lifted her head and waved a hand to the flushed face of her husband.

"Must he, Paul? I am not quite sure that friendship has finished having its say." But Ascherer never wasted breath in repeating an order. His head was withdrawn before Venice had completed the sentence. She turned to Culver. "Perhaps you had better go. Paul does not like to be kept waiting. I am afraid there is nothing I can do about Richenda's peril. I can only hope the presence of Dr. Farady in the car will avert any immediate disaster. Now, I wonder where those two little birds have gone!"

Turning her back on him she went slowly down the steps.

## 6.

Paul Ascherer was lying in bed with his face towards the wall. He did not turn when he heard Culver come into the room. He just said:

“Shut the door.”

Compared with the smooth silkiness of his usual tones his voice sounded flat, a little strangled.

As Culver closed the door he was aware of that sensation of superiority which a man in possession of full health feels over an invalid. He rubbed his hands.

“Well, Paul, it’s a strange thing to find you in bed. How are we this morning?”

“Cut out the royal plural,” said Ascherer. “One of you is as much as I can stand.”

Culver thought:

“Damn the man! Thinks he can treat me how he pleases.” Aloud he said: “Too bad you being laid up this way. Eaten something that’s disagreed with you, I expect.”

“You can expect what you like, Richard, as long as you don’t bother me with it. Go and sit down where your feet won’t make such a clatter.”

Culver occupied a chair and remarked amiably:

“I’ve been thinking over this business of *Paradis sur Mer*, and I’ve come to the conclusion . . .”

“Yes, Richard, that is just what you have done. You have come to the conclusion. I have been on the telephone this morning to Prescott. I have informed him that he will be receiving your resignation from the five directorships you hold in my group.”

“My resignation?”

That meant a loss of nearly three thousand a year.

Ascherer moved his head about on the pillow.

"All right, then I won't be so particular about words. You're out, that's what it comes to."

Culver brought his feet down on the floor with a bang and rose.

"Out, am I. We'll see what the shareholders have to say about that."

"Don't be silly, Richard. The shareholders will do what I tell them to do; and so will the other members of the board. I have told Prescott to prepare a paragraph about it for the evening papers. It's always better to do these things in a straightforward way. Rumours of dissension on the board of companies have a much worse effect on markets than a plain statement of fact."

Culver started to walk up and down the room.

"All very nice," he said, "very nice indeed."

The voice from the bed replied:

"So glad you think so. Wouldn't surprise me if some of the stock went up a point or two. Everybody knows what an ass you are."

Culver stopped beside the bed.

"So I'm an ass, am I? It hasn't occurred to you that that is not a very safe thing to say to a man of my temper? Why I could . . ."

"Of course you could," and Paul Ascherer looked into the angry and inflamed face with a new and oddly critical expression. "Of course you could, Richard; indeed I'm half-disposed to wonder if you haven't."

"Haven't what?"

"Never mind—at present. Only when you make

telephone calls you should take care that nobody is listening in." There was something dark and significant in the way he said "at present." "Now there is one thing more, Richard. So long as you are a guest in my house you will try and behave like a gentleman. I'll have no more roaring under my window, and I'll have no further references made to Richenda Warrant. Understand that most clearly."

Culver raised his voice to a parade-ground level.

"I am leaving this house right now, and you will be hearing from my lawyers."

Ascherer said:

"Dear me! Lawyers are so alarming, are they not? But you won't be leaving the house today, Richard. Nobody will leave the house until I have found out what is the matter with me. That is all I have to say."

But Culver did not move. Instead he did a most unusual thing. He laid the palm of his hand on Ascherer's forehead and held it there.

"I thought as much. You're running a temperature. You're delirious. This gipsy's warning has scared you. Poor old chap, that's too bad! Of course it explains the crazy things you've been saying and doing. I'll get on to Prescott straightaway."

"I shouldn't. I foresaw you might try something of that kind. Prescott has his instructions in the event of your doing so."

Culver licked his lips.

"What instructions?"

"Never mind. Draw those curtains a little closer."

But Culver did not appear to have heard the request. He went out of the room like a drunken man.

## 7.

Rentyen was looking very green when Farady helped him from the car. As a result of sleep he had recovered most of his faculties, but his spirits were at a low ebb, and when Venice met him in the hall he covered his face with his hands and peered through a trellis of fingers with every indication of a contrite heart. Farady and Richenda went on up the stairs.

Venice asked:

"What's the matter, Faun?"

He shook his head, painfully.

"A distressing encounter with the bottle. I'm ashamed to say I've been tight."

"Poor Faun! What can I do?"

"Despise me," he suggested.

"That would be too difficult. Would it help if I got a little that way myself?"

He smiled, and the smile went through his head like a spear.

"Only a very beautiful nature would make such a proposal. But it must not be, my sweet. You would never catch me up. You would begin to get jolly about the time that I reached the crying stage. I shall go to my room and repent."

"I will tell them to send you up some lunch."

“No lunch,” he beseeched.

“Nothing at all?”

“Well, perhaps a little cucumber—and I’ll wear it. I’ll wear it on my brow. A compress of love! Which reminds me, have you ever been told that I love you more than the stars or the sea or the song of birds?”

“Isn’t that nice?” said Venice. “Not that I’ve ever noticed you loving any of those things.”

“Perhaps I ought not to have included the sea. I don’t really love the sea. I never feel that I *must* go down to the sea again; on the other hand I do feel that I must go to bed, lest worse befall.”

“All right then. Run along.”

“Not that—not run. Rather will I move like a ghost which once again in complete steel revisits the glimpses of the moon, making night hideous and we fools of nature . . .” He broke off with his foot on the lowest stair. “Do *you* think I’d be so bad as Hamlet?”

Venice nodded slowly.

“Yes, darling, rather bad.”

Rentyen stiffened.

“Then let me tell you something—you . . . you’re probably quite right.”

He went up the stairs with his eyes covered.

Venice watched him as a mother might have watched a favourite child.

She thought:

“How ungenerous—how untidy life is. We could

be so happy together. What idiotic things we might say and do. I wonder if any other woman has refused to run away with her lover because she knows that her husband is necessary to his welfare. Life is funny."

She did not notice Farady come down the stairs, but she was aware that he was standing beside her for some seconds before she spoke.

"You must be a very nice man, Dr. Farady. Not many people are so sensitive as to wait until a woman has finished thinking. Well, what is it?"

"Have you seen Mr. Ascherer this morning?"

She shook her head.

"Paul doesn't encourage . . . No, except his head at the window. Why?"

Farady looked rather worried.

"I'm not satisfied about him."

"You mean he's ill—really ill?"

"No, not yet; but he very easily may be. Last night he complained of a sore throat."

"He gets sore throats. Who doesn't in this place?"

"Yes, quite so. But he has one or two other symptoms which, which are rather contradictory. There's a curious swelling of the tongue and quite a bit of temperature."

"Anything else?"

"The pupils of his eyes are very much dilated and he complains of an unaccountable desire to go to sleep."

“What does that point to?”

“That’s what I want to know. If he is suffering from a slightly septic condition one would expect the temperature, but not to find the pupils dilated and not the sleepiness. As a matter of fact in the early stages of septicæmia it is usual for the faculties to be rather alert.”

“Then what would account for the sleepiness and the dilated pupils?”

Farady hesitated and tried to speak casually.

“Well, there are certain narcotics and poisons which . . .”

“Poisons?” Venice put a hand to her throat and Farady watched the colour drain from her cheeks.  
“Dr. Farady, what are you suggesting?”

He did not reply at once, then:

“I understand that Lord Garaud is stopping at the Hermitage. With your consent I should like to ask him to have a look at Mr. Ascherer.”

“Lord Garaud who attended the . . . Yes, yes, of course. By all means, that is unless Paul . . .”

“I don’t mean to ask Mr. Ascherer.”

“But isn’t that taking rather a high hand? Won’t Paul think you haven’t much confidence in your own judgment?”

Farady looked at her in silence. Under his scrutiny the colour raced back into her cheeks. Instinctively she knew that he was asking himself if she was trying to prevent him calling in a second opinion.

Farady said:

"When a patient's life may be at stake I take no chances."

He turned towards the study. Her voice followed him. She said:

"Please tell Lord Garaud that it is my special wish he should be consulted."

Farady said: "Very well," over his shoulder.

"My God!" thought Venice.

Farady thought:

"Was that bravado or what?"

He put through the call.

Lord Garaud presented himself within half an hour. He was a tall limp man, who wore pince-nez and a blue suit which looked more like an inheritance than a serious article of apparel. Round his neck was a perfectly straight collar about three inches in height, and round the collar was a pale blue tie which would have shocked the proprieties of an East Coast pier. Apart from his external peculiarities he had a bad cold and seemed to be in a bad temper.

He was shown into the study where Farady was awaiting him. He said:

"I won't shake hands. I never do. If you could let me have a clean pocket handkerchief I'd be obliged."

Farady produced an unused handkerchief from his pocket and proffered it.

"This do?"

Lord Garaud examined it carefully and nodded.

"Though I never can understand why people have

initials embroidered on something which ought to be thrown away immediately after use. When we imagine the dissemination of germs that takes place in any laundry . . . but never mind. Now what's the trouble here. I'm a bit doubtful whether you shouldn't have sent for a French doctor, on a point of etiquette. I am not at all sure that an English doctor is entitled to sign a death certificate on French soil. However, go on." He listened without interrupting while Farady detailed the symptoms of the case. At the conclusion he pulled his walrus moustache reflectively. "Young man, I'm going to give you a word of advice. You are trying to persuade me and yourself that this patient is suffering from two ailments at the same time. Well, that is not to be allowed. A doctor should never associate himself with alternative diagnoses. He must stick to one thing or the other. In the event of the symptoms being too conflicting in character it might even be expedient to invent some new-fangled name to cover them. However, let's go upstairs."

They went. Paul Ascherer still lay with his face to the wall.

"Who is it?" he asked, drowsily.

"I've brought Lord Garaud to have a look at you."

Ascherer sat up in bed, stared, frowned and waved his hand irritably.

"This man with the horrible tie?"

Lord Garaud said:

"Never you mind my tie. It isn't often I get a

holiday but when I do I like people to know it. Now, put on that table light, Dr. Farady, and let me have a look at him."

Ascherer said:

"I don't know what I keep a private medical attendant for?"

"You can wonder about that after I've gone. Now how do you feel?"

"Sleepy—hard to keep awake."

"Why try?"

"I never have slept in the day-time and don't intend to start."

Garaud moved the naked light to and fro before the patient's eyes.

"I suppose you must do that?"

"Yes. Open your mouth and don't try to talk." He examined the throat. The tonsils were considerably inflamed and swollen. "I want a magnifying-glass."

Ascherer pointed at a writing-table across the room. Farady fetched the glass and gave it to Garaud. Garaud said:

"Put out your tongue."

"Caaa!"

"No. I thought you couldn't. Never mind."

He examined the tongue minutely through the glass and beckoned Farady to have a look.

"See? Are those very fine scratches?"

"They seem to be."

Garaud returned the glass and the lamp to the table.

“Tongue beginning to hurt, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Throbs. It’s the one thing that’s kept me awake.”

“It would. We must have a test made from the inflamed area on the tongue. Who’d be able to do that, d’you know?”

Farady said:

“I could find out from the Marquis de Renanceau. He is president of a hospital at Mentone.”

Paul Ascherer exclaimed: “Ah!” He caught Farady’s eye and noted that Farady looked back at him with a curious expression. “Wondering what I was wondering?” he asked.

Farady said nothing. Garaud went on:

“Perhaps you’ll attend to that—quickly. Let me know the result at my hotel.”

“I will, Lord Garaud. Do you suggest any immediate treatment?”

Lord Garaud gave Farady a chance.

“What are your suggestions?”

“Slightly mixed. Atropine and anti-scarletinal serum.”

“Very good.”

Then Ascherer said:

“You’re a pair of fools if you think I’ve got scarlet fever. I know what’s the matter with me.”

Lord Garaud smiled wanly through the drapery of his moustache.

“You’re the sort of man who thinks he knows everything. Come along then, out with it.”

But Ascherer was too cunning to show his hand before they revealed theirs.

“I’ll have your views first.”

“You’ve picked up a microbe.”

“What kind of microbe?”

“I’ll know for certain when I’ve heard the result of that test.”

Then Farady:

“At a guess I should say it was hæmolytic streptococcus.”

Ascherer said:

“That’s just a name to me. But I’ll tell you something, Lord Garaud, and you Farady. I didn’t pick it up. It was presented to me—with the greatest possible discretion. I have been poisoned.”

Lord Garaud took off his pince-nez, wiped them carefully and returned them to his nose. He was not a man who reacted to sensationalism. He had outlived the ability to feel surprise about anything.

“I see. You think that?”

“Yes. And I’ll tell you something else I know. I’m going to die.”

Lord Garaud nodded and dabbed his nose with the handkerchief.

“No doubt you will too—in the fullness of time.”

“There will not be very much fullness, Lord Garaud. But I hope there will be time for me to be able to name the man—or woman—I have to thank for this.”

He slid down beneath the covers and turned his face to the wall.

Lord Garaud addressed Farady.

"I'll leave you to attend to getting the er . . . You have your instruments, of course. Give me a ring later."

8.

The girl whose hair appeared to be alight, and in whose eyes were dancing tongues of flame, drummed her little feet upon the floor, so that the ten crimson embers of her painted toe-nails, visible through the sandals she wore, looked like sparks leaping from a forge. Even the words that showered from her mouth were so many fiery particles from the furnaces of hell. In short, Lili was ablaze.

"You. . . . You. . . . You . . .!" In no single instance did she repeat herself. "I do not know how I bear with you another minute! Miserable old wretch and liar. Today when you should be glad—joyous—dancing for pleasure of life, you will not talk—you will not smile—you creep from room to room as though you have swallowed an eel alive."

The Marquis de Renanceau pressed his hands to his ears and moaned. He asked himself if ever a man was so afflicted? It was useless to speak to Lili of such soul-stirring matters as the honour of his family. How should a little trull like that understand anything so sacred? She was vulgar, mercenary and wholly abominable. It seemed as though Fate had determined to scourge him even with his own recreations.

Ah, bitter, bitter spite! Yet it was she and such as she who had brought him to his present extremity. How much of Renanceau had been converted into jewellery and furs to bespangle and envelop such trash as Lili? It did not bear thinking on. Had ever a man paid so high a price for generosity and a tender heart?

Lili had thrown herself on to a divan and was kicking her legs in the air. She looked as if she was riding a bicycle upside down.

“Pig! Beast! Liar! You make a fortune at the tables and refuse me even one little ermine coat.”

The Marquis stuck doggedly to his story.

“I made no fortune at the tables.”

“You dare to say so. Why then did Roma tell me to my face that she sees you leave the club with more money than you can carry.”

The Marquis launched a counter-attack.

“I thought I had made it clear, Lili, when I offered you my protection, that your friendship with Roma, and such as Roma, must cease. Does the name of Renanceau mean so little to you that you smirch its honour with such base associations? If you cannot respect either my name or my wishes . . .”

Lili yelled:

“Twenty-seven thousand francs is not much to ask for putting up with an old . . .”

“Silence. One more word and I will have you thrown to where you belong—the street.”

Lili laughed shrilly.

"You will have to get a man to help you do that. At least it would be a change to feel some arms with a little strength in them. Why you . . ."

The telephone rang. Renanceau said:

"You had better answer that."

Lili thought so too, for this was the hour at which the Marquis habitually watched the *Tir aux Pigeons*, and calls were apt to be received of which it was politic he should know nothing. She snatched up the telephone.

"Ullo-ullo!" She listened and shook her head.  
"I don't know. He talks English. Faradie?"

The Marquis hesitated before taking the telephone.

"Yees—speaking. Yees, you have only to mention my name at the hospital and it will be all right. Is there then somebody who is ill? Monsieur Ascherer? *Vraiment?*" But although his voice was charged with distress, a bright and eager look had come into his eyes. "I hope it is not serious. Tch! tch! You will please say I am so sorry."

At the other end of the line Farady said:

"Mr. Ascherer has instructed me to ask you if you would dine with him tonight."

"Tonight? And he so ill? I would not think of coming."

"Mr. Ascherer is very insistent that you should come."

Renanceau licked his lips.

"I regret it is impossible."

"Don't say that, Marquis," said Farady. "It would

be much pleasanter to have your consent without pressure."

There was a pause, then:

"What do you mean by pressure?"

"I happened to touch a pocket of your dinner-jacket last night. I may have been wrong, but I had an idea that you were carrying a pistol."

"Monsieur, that would be entirely my own affair."

"Entirely. All the same we shall hope to see you at dinner."

Another pause—a very long one. Lili noted that the Marquis was trembling and had gone white.

"At what hour?" he asked slowly.

"Eight-thirty."

The Marquis put down the telephone.

"And now, perhaps," Lili began . . .

He swung round on her like a snake.

"S-s-silence!"

There was danger and Lili sought refuge in tears.

"You are cruel to your Lili. You do not love your Lili—your poor Lili-li-li-li aaough!"

## 9.

Farady put down the telephone and lit a cigarette. In the mirror before him was the reflection of Culver standing in the open doorway. The reflection had been there throughout his talk to Renanceau. There was an air of heavy perplexity on Culver's features. Farady said:

“Why not come in?”

Culver said:

“I happened to overhear what you were saying to Renanceau.”

“Yes, I saw you were listening.”

“Eh? No question of listening. The door was open. If it was a private conversation you should have shut the door.”

“It wasn’t private.”

“That’s all right, then.” He came into the room, produced a tobacco-pouch and started to fill a pipe. “I thought Ascherer was supposed to be ill.”

“He is.”

“Then what’s the idea of this *tête-à-tête* dinner with Renanceau?”

“It isn’t going to be a *tête-à-tête*. You’re all invited to attend.”

“What the deuce are you talking about?”

“Mr. Ascherer will explain that himself. I think I heard the car that’s taking me to Mentone.”

But Culver barred his way.

“Here, wait a minute. There’s no hurry.”

“But there is.”

“No, this is important. There’s something very fishy going on in this house. I’m not asking questions—I’m telling you. Ascherer has got a bee in his bonnet.”

Farady said:

“I don’t know about a bee, but he has certainly been stung by something. I must go.”

Culver put a hand on his arm.

"Now, look here, Farady, there's no sense in trying to keep anybody in the dark; especially a man who might be able to throw a bit of light on the business. Can you deny that Ascherer believes that somebody has been playing hanky-panky? I won't put it clearer than that. You know what I'm driving at as well as I do. Well, in my opinion it is just a lot of bunk; but supposing it isn't bunk?" He stopped and lit his pipe.

"Well?"

"It might be interesting to know why Rentyen went along the passage towards Ascherer's room at about two a.m. this morning."

Farady said:

"Why not ask him?" He went out without waiting for a reply.

In the hall he met Richenda, who said:

"Miles, I want to talk to you."

"It'll have to be later, darling. I've a job that can't wait."

"I've decided to go back and look after my father."

He hesitated.

"You had better talk to Mr. Ascherer about that."

"But he's ill."

"All the same you had better talk to him."

Richenda frowned.

"You're very bossy all of a sudden. Besides, what has it got to do with Mr. Ascherer?"

“You had better ask him.”

Richenda said:

“Ask nothing. I shall tell him.”

She watched Farady jump into the car and drive away.

“What’s come over everybody?” she wondered.

10.

Venice Ascherer knocked on the door of her husband’s room. She thought:

“I am knocking on the door of my husband’s room!”

Could anything have testified more clearly to the relations that existed between them? Only in marriage is to be found such an utter disseverance of men and women. No two people were ever further apart than she and Paul. Yet each had for the other a deeply rooted admiration. But that admiration was totally impersonal. It was of the order that is felt for inanimate objects—for a work of art—a piece of machinery—a statue—a bridge. They had become mere spectators of each other. There was neither spiritual nor bodily fusion between them.

She knew that Paul was awake for, as she came along the corridor, she had heard his voice, queer and foggy, speaking on the telephone. And as she stopped at the door she had heard a click as the telephone was returned to the rest.

She knocked again. She knew that he would know it was she who knocked, for no two people rap a panel with the same touch or measure. This time he bade her enter—wearily and unwillingly.

Venice had brought with her a vase of flowers and she put it on the bedside table. She did not expect thanks and was not disappointed when he offered none.

He had loosened the neck of his pyjamas. A dark mole on his right shoulder accentuated the whiteness of his flesh. Looking at his head resting on the pillow, she thought how singularly fine was the chiselling of his features. The faintly sneering curl of his upper lip was a subtle and most exquisite piece of modelling. So too were the nostrils with their ever present suggestion that the odours of the world offended his senses. In the eyes an expression that she had never seen before—an expression of suffering, from within, mingled with disappointment. It was a more human expression than he was accustomed to wear and it awoke in her a feeling of pity.

“Paul, I am so sorry,” she said, and lightly touched his hair.

He did not shrink away, but became even more still, and Venice felt as if each particular hair was in silent revolt against her touch. She had violated a tacit understanding that there should be no intimacies of any kind between them.

As Venice withdrew her hand she wondered how many years had passed since they had had the slightest

voluntary contact with each other. Too many to remember.

She repeated: "I'm sorry," but this time for a different reason. She added: "Somehow you looked so pitiful."

"There is very little pity in me—even for myself," he replied. "Find yourself a chair, Venice. It fusses me to have you standing there."

She moved away and sat on the window-seat. A slant of sunlight seemed to have threaded primroses in her dark hair.

"Paul, Dr. Farady says you must have a nurse. I would willingly nurse you if you would care for that."

He debated the suggestion in silence, then said:

"You are very considerate all of a sudden. I wonder why."

"Would you like me to nurse you?" she repeated.

"Thank you, I think not. I have no experience of myself as an invalid. I might not behave too well. It would be wiser, probably, to have someone with whom I am less familiar."

"If being a stranger is a necessary qualification I should have thought I had it," said Venice, coldly.

He gave one of his rare smiles.

"You use words very nimbly, Venice. You never say a meaningless thing. I should have married a fool. She might have loved me better. Perhaps Richenda would nurse me."

Venice said:

"You can't ask somebody you have only met three or four times to do that."

"I have lost very little because I failed to ask," he interrupted. "Send her to see me, please."

"Now?" There was a little frost on the word.

"In your own time—when you are ready to go."

Venice rose, with a faint shrug.

"That might as well be now."

"One moment," he said. "You will think I have behaved very ungraciously; but I am, unfortunately, a man with a one-track mind. To me marriage where there are no children is nothing. The woman who is not a mother could never exist as a reality to me. Had you been anybody but your lovely self, I would have suggested, years ago, that our marriage should be dissolved. It is a tribute to your charm and brilliance that I did not do so."

Venice said:

"There is no need to tell me that I was never more than a picture on the wall."

"You were something more than *that*," he replied. "There is no one for whom I have a greater regard. With my body I have been unfaithful to you, Venice, I do not know how often, but I have never been unfaithful to you in spirit."

Venice said:

"I have never been faithful to you in spirit, Paul. In all else, yes, but never in spirit. I do not think our spirits have ever met."

"That is probably true. It is strange what different

stars we steer by, you and I. My spirit was always so much more fastidious than my body. With you it is the reverse."

He lapsed into silence, broken by a yawn that was half a groan.

"Have a little sleep, Paul. It can't be right for you to talk so much."

"I talk to keep myself awake. I am afraid to go to sleep. If I went to sleep I might miss the fun."

"The fun?" she echoed.

And he repeated:

"The fun. What could be more amusing than for a victim to live long enough to track down his own murderer?"

Venice shivered.

"Don't, Paul. You don't know what you're saying. Besides you are not going to die."

"Is that a prophecy or mere civility. I might believe you, my dear, if you came of gipsy stock. Now, find me Richenda. And one word of warning. For the next few days try to subdue your enthusiasm for Rentyen, at least in public. It would be a pity if suspicion were to fall on you."

Venice was moving towards the door and she stopped short.

"Suspicion? On me?"

"Wives have," said he.

Venice did not wait to hear more. She went in search of Richenda. But Richenda was nowhere to be found.

She had decided that nobody should control her actions but herself. She had left for Nice in a hired car.

## III.

When Holmes conveyed the news to Ascherer that Richenda had left the house, an expression of fleeting pain passed over his face.

“She left me a message?”

“No, sir.”

He raised himself on his elbows and called for more pillows to prop him up. The effort made to rise caused his head to throb violently. He felt that some outside power was knocking—knocking—knocking. He thought:

“I must not let it in.” Aloud he said: “Bring me the deed-box from the bottom drawer of that chest.”

He did not ask for his keys. They were, as ever, in the pocket of his pyjamas.

Holmes put the deed-box on the slope made by his knees.

“Now bring me a spirit-lamp on a tray.”

“A spirit-lamp, sir?”

Ascherer looked at the man with reproachful eyes.

“Very good, sir. At once, sir.”

Ascherer did not open the deed-box until the lamp—a small copper affair from a breakfast warmer—had been brought and lighted.

“Now go away.”

“Yes, sir.”

Holmes went.

Ascherer thought:

"I must put my house in order. My throat and tongue are aching—aching—the room isn't keeping still—who's knocking?—keep out—what a crowd in Middlesex Street—what a pushing, laughing, bargaining crowd—Sunday morning in Petticoat Lane—gherkins and pickled herrings—'O'o wants a nice 'oneymoon suit?—Any price you like—Pick 'em up! Pick 'em up!' 'An' into the henvelope halong wiv the gol' albert and chain I'm puttin' a golden sov'reign. Wot's zat? Somebody say I 'aven't no sovereigns? Then scrape the peel off of yer eyes an' watch me. There's one—there's two—there's three . . . up to twenty . . . and me moving through—watching—waiting—with the world to beat. Hang on! Hang on to it! That's better. . . . That's better!"

The fluid forms in the room stabilised and became solid. There was the window again with the flowers of the acacia white against the blue afternoon sky. His mind floated back from the past to the present—through chaos into clarity.

He rubbed his forehead. It was hot and dry, but the brain behind it was at work. It had freed itself from the bonds of delirium. He could think now—think—feel—act.

He fumbled in his pocket for the key.

Richenda had gone—gone to Warrant, because the poor weak fool was drinking away his sight. He thought:

"He had no right to draw her away from me when I needed her most. His sickness has defeated me. He means more to her than I. She left me without a word or thought."

And suddenly he found himself hating Clive Warrant where before he had only pitied him. Warrant had conquered him, not by strength, but by weakness. It was intolerable.

"I must mean something to her," his thoughts ran. "She must feel more for me than for . . . But why should she? I have not had time enough. Yet she should have felt the tie between us. Surely that tie is stronger than any other? Surely . . ."

He unlocked the deed-box and his white fingers moved through the papers it contained. Presently he found what he was seeking—a folded letter covering half a page.

"Tel.: Gerrard 1111. QUERIDA NURSING HOME,  
MONTAGUE PLACE, W.

COALY DARLING,

The baby was born last night—I wished you'd been there—I wanted someone to show her to—at once.

I feel she is entirely mine which is lovely, lovely. D'you remember the day I said I'd call her Richenda? I wouldn't have known what to call her if she'd been a boy.

She hasn't got that little mole by your shoulder though!—Poor girl!

Very good I feel.

LAURA.

June 15th, 1915."

Clive Warrant was in France when that letter was written. The matron of the nursing home had sent him a wire. There was no lovely letter for him. But the letter which he had written to Laura had been inspired. He had celebrated the coming of Richenda in a dugout near Poperinghe. Outside the guns were firing salvos in honour of his daughter. A crump which burst near the dugout steps detonated the name "Richenda." Also he sent a wire to Solomon's in Piccadilly, bidding them dispatch carnations. But the wire miscarried and the flowers were not delivered. This, perhaps, was a good thing.

Laura had shown the letter to Ascherer beneath one of the derelict oaks in Richmond Park. It was the first time Ascherer had pitied Clive Warrant. His pity was akin to contempt.

"Tell him the truth," he said, bluntly.

But Laura would not do that. It would be too much like sentencing a man to death. Being in France was awful enough. Let him have something to look forward to. Let the war end first.

So it was decided that way.

But the end of the war brought about changes in the minds and conditions of men. Paul Ascherer had become a great person and the responsibilities of greatness had gathered around him. Divorce had become common currency, too common for such a man as himself to be involved in. The flame of his passion for Laura had died down through embers into grey ash. Laura with a child that the law would

not allow him to claim as his own was not worth the damage to his reputation that divorce proceedings would involve. Besides he had entered a zone in which he was able to choose a woman of nobler stature to be the mother of his children, and help him to found a line which should make the name of Ascherer as famous as Rothschild.

When he told Laura his decision only her eyes reproached him. What he said was true enough; she had had her chance and had neglected to take it. But he made a mistake in adding:

“After all, Warrant is a very gifted fellow. You loved him once and probably will again. There is no reason why he should ever know the truth about Richenda.”

“None,” she answered coldly, for her heart had died. “But women don’t love twice in the same direction.”

“A clever woman can do most things,” he replied. “I would like to have made some provision for Richenda, only . . .”

She cut him short.

“That would hardly be fair to any of us.”

“Just so. From time to time I hope you will let me see her.”

Laura shook her head.

“Never. That part of our lives is over. You have dotted the i’s and put the full stop and it’s over.”

He half expected she would say that and he accepted it without contradiction or argument.

Laura rose and picked up her gloves. He said:

"You have been very gallant and sensible about all this."

She forced a smile.

"I have, haven't I? And now you are free to build up the house of Ascherer. When the grandchildren gather round you at Christmas, don't forget that the foundation-stone was laid by me."

"Am I likely to forget?" he asked.

"Most likely," she replied. "Only one thing would make you remember."

"And that is?"

"You may not have another child. Good-bye, Paul."

As the door closed behind her he felt as if he was standing in a cold wind.

Paul Ascherer sighed and held the letter in the flame of the spirit-lamp. He did not watch the flame catch the paper and curl among its crumpled words. He let it fall on to the tray and covered his eyes. He was burning the loveliest memory in his life. He was burning a poem—a song that had never been sung. The last of its music was the tiny metallic clinking of charred embers as they grew cold.

He was alone now with his thoughts—thoughts of the childless, barren years. Of the great house of Ascherer nothing existed but a foundation-stone.

He heard a voice lifted to a yell, and knew it as his own.

"Richenda—Richenda! You wouldn't leave me to die in the dark!"

Hurrying feet in the corridor and the door flung open. Farady standing there, and saying, reassuringly:

"It's all right, Mr. Ascherer. I'm here!"

He could feel the delirium possessing him again. The window had begun to dip and curtsey—the bed to rock like a ship at sea. Then Farady's hand on his forehead keeping his head on his shoulders.

"What's it all about, then?"

"The house of Ascherer—of Ascherer. My grandmother dreaming it all—sitting on a stool before the fish bar. Twenty stone she weighed—and the legs of the stool boring holes—three holes—in the pavement—inches deep."

The clinking of a metal box set down. The clinking of metal against glass.

"Give me your arm. That's the way. Now!"

A sharp prick from the hypodermic needle and a sense of something moving stealthily beneath the flesh. A cool dab of alcohol.

"There we are!"

"The house is full of murderers," said the voice thickly, "and you must help me catch the right one. Say you will—say you will?"

"Rely on me," said Farady.

"Swear it."

"I swear."

## 12.

"Faun, Faun!" Venice's tone was urgent. Her hand shook the sleeper's shoulder. "Faun, you must wake up!"

Rentyen moved his head stiffly, then sat up like a jack-in-the-box. He asked:

"Is the house, or only my head, on fire?"

There was eau-de-Cologne on his dressing-table. She crossed, soaked her handkerchief in the spirit and returned.

"Now shut your eyes."

He obeyed and she smoothed and dabbed his face and neck.

"O cool and most delicious lady," he sighed. "Must I come to, now, or may I go on being nursed for a year or so?"

"There's something you must know at once."

"Go ahead, then, I'm all right. The last of my aches have vanished beneath your touch." He opened his eyes, saw the anxiety on her face and became serious. "Hey, then, what's up?"

"It's Paul. He believes he's been poisoned."

Rentyen took one of her hands.

"At dinner last night we had *Demoiselles de Cherbourg*. The lobster is a treacherous brute who bites its victim after its own death."

"You don't understand, Faun. He believes one of us has poisoned him."

Rentyen was on his feet before she had finished the sentence.

"One of us? He must be raving."

"I don't know. He's queer and dark about it. There is something he's plotting to do. Faun, is it true that you went to Paul's room last night?"

"I—what are you driving at?" There was a fine show of anger in his eyes. "Kindly tell me—please."

"Colonel Culver said . . ."

Rentyen threw up his head.

"I might have known . . ."

"Then it is true?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"O Faun!"

"Why not?" he repeated. "Is it so unusual for a guest . . ."

"There's no time for all that. The Colonel said that you came into his room afterwards and said something about having finished your mischief for the day. Did you?"

"Yes. The fool had been spying on me. I intended he should know that I knew it."

"But Faun, don't you see that he could twist those words to mean anything? Why did you go to Paul's room at that hour of the night?"

Rentyen stopped pacing the floor, fixed her with his cool grey eyes and began to laugh.

"Don't you know? Surely it's obvious. I had some arsenic I wanted to get rid of. No, no, it was prussic acid. I make a point of carrying poisons when

I'm visiting. One never knows when one's host may become unbearable." The cynical raillery departed from his voice and rage possessed it. "My God, Venice, it's preposterous! What do you take me for? A Wainwright—a Crippen? Am I the sort of man . . .?"

"My dear, not so loud," she begged. "It isn't I who suspects, or ever could suspect you. Be sane and a little just. I'm trying to look ahead."

Rentyen said:

"I was looking ahead last night when I told Paul I wanted you. Men who are as frank as I was don't use poison—much."

Venice went to the window.

"That was insane—insane. And without even asking my consent! Listen Faun, this isn't the moment for acting but for action. Something that does not bear thinking of may have taken place in this house. Do you realise that Paul may have been murdered?"

"You talk as if he was a dead man. If everyone with a touch of tonsillitis is going to start a canard . . ."

Venice made a hopeless gesture.

"If you refuse to see!"

Rentyen came over and stood beside her. He had grown very white and the corners of his mouth had begun to twitch with the nervous movements they betrayed before he went on the stage at a first night. Until that moment he had chosen to regard all she had been saying as something fantastic which provided an opportunity to indulge in one of these scenes which

he loved to play. He was shocked beyond measure to realise that she was in earnest. The artificialities of life were delightful, but for its realities he had a fastidious horror. If Paul Ascherer had indeed been poisoned by one of his guests, what was more likely than that suspicion would fall upon Venice or himself? They, of all the rest, had the greater reason for wishing him out of the way. It was one thing to court publicity by challenging a fool like Culver to fight a duel, but to be suspected of having done away with a man by poison would be to find himself involved in a most hideous form of notoriety, that would stick, however effectively he succeeded in proving himself innocent of the charge.

He tried to face up to the problem as he would have done had the situation arisen in a play. A man loves the wife of a cynical financier and runs away with her. Fine. Present-day audiences would applaud his courage in doing so. But let that financier die—even from natural causes—and the whole of the sympathy would be withdrawn from the truant lovers and invested in the corpse. Audiences were like that. The world was like that. Dead men are bound to win. The theatre is the barometer of life. In both the theatre and in life the lovers are called upon to pay a heavy toll. The film rights of such a story could not be released in America unless the lovers paid—and paid in full.

“Venice,” he said, and his voice was little louder than a whisper, “Venice, this is ghastly! Paul may be

wrong—must be wrong—but we can't afford to take the risk. These doctors—they won't let him die—they—they mustn't. I mean, who would want that? Nobody—ever. God knows the man has vile qualities which . . . but in a way, I've liked him—I *do* like him. He's cruel, calculating, yes; but he is admirable, too; he's an artist. Now, look, my darling, I have the beginnings of an idea. This fellow Culver can be got round. The great thing is to appear natural and unmoved. We must agree, for the time, to ridicule any idea that we are more to each other than very good friends. The last thing would be to show any emotion—or panic. Come, let's get down-stairs and think it over coolly and sensibly."

He went to the door and held it open for her.

"Very well," she assented, and passed through into the corridor.

Standing in the doorway of his room was Culver. He neither spoke nor moved as Venice and Rentyen went by. He just looked at them—watching them.

At the head of the staircase Rentyen said:

"I'll join you in a minute."

He ignored the swift "No" from Venice, and her hand that sought to check him.

Culver was still at the door of his room when Rentyen returned.

"Can I come inside?"

Culver did not move.

"Why?"

"I want a word with you."

Culver did not move.

"Indeed. I'm not squeamish, Rentyen, but I'd rather not talk to a man who seizes the opportunity of his host's illness to make love to . . ."

Rentyen had wanted to do it since their first meeting. There was something irresistible about that heavy jaw of Culver's. It was more by accident than skill that his fist reached the mark quite so surely. Culver went backwards into his room and oblivion. The thing done, Rentyen closed the door on the results. All his hatred and indignation had been packed into a single blow. He did not invite the possibility of a second round. He had no wish to find out whether his ascendancy could be proved in a longer encounter. It seemed highly improbable that it would. So he shut the door and went downstairs.

He had reached the hall before satisfaction gave way to the realisation that he could hardly have acted more stupidly. At a time when everything pointed to the wisdom of going slow and watching each step, he had advertised his love for Venice by starting a fight in defence of her name.

Through the open front door, in the quadrangle before the house he saw his car, and with that came an idea.

It was not the practice of Napier Rentyen to develop or analyse ideas before putting them into action. He was a man who extemporised his way through life, standing or falling by the results of his extemporisations. Within a quarter of a minute of seeing the car he was

racing along the road in the direction of Mentone. He drove fast and perilously and pulled up with a great squealing of braked wheels before the entrance to the police station. Here he alighted and ignoring the young gendarme in the outer hall, pushed open a door bearing the words "PRÉFET DE POLICE."

At the moment of his arrival the owner of the office was talking on the telephone. Monsieur Frenant, *Préfet de Police*, was a fat man with a lardy, featureless face and very small eyes which twinkled merrily at Rentyen by way of greeting. The twinkle was accompanied by a nod in the direction of an unoccupied chair and a silent movement of the lips which plainly read:

*"Bonjour, M. Rentyen, comment allez vous?"*

Feeling that it was good to be recognised, Rentyen occupied the chair and sat with folded arms.

The telephone conversation pursued its course. Nearly all of it seemed to be coming from the other end of the wire, punctuated by "*Si si*" and "*Parfaitemment*" from the Préfet. There was a lot of it. Too much. Rentyen began to feel restless and ignored. He noticed, too, that the Préfet was showing signs of either perplexity or boredom. His first complete remark argued that it was the former.

*"Un petit moment, Monsieur. I tink he ees bettaire you tell me all of zis in Engleesh. I shall comprehend, do not have fear. So, en recommence!"*

Rentyen rattled a foot on the floor. He thought:

*"This is impossible! We're going to have the whole blasted thing over again."*

Once more the "Ahs" the "Ums" and the "si sis" held sway. At one period Monsieur Frenant raised his little eyes and looked at Rentyen with new interest. In self-defence Rentyen returned the look with a yawn.

At long last came the end.

"I tank you, Monsieur, and now zat zere ees no mistake Monsieur will spell ze name and I write him down. *Bon*, I attend. C-U-L-V . . ."

"E-R," cried Rentyen and sat bolt upright.

The fool had forestalled him. He had got his story in first. The whole value of this call on the police had been cancelled.

Monsieur Frenant had pushed back his chair and folded chubby hands on a very round paunch which looked as if its owner had, by some method known only to himself, succeeded in swallowing whole a water-melon.

"*Et maintenant*, Monsieur Rentyen?" said he, and there was in his eyes the expression of a man who is relishing a piquant situation. "*Et maintenant?*"

Rentyen shook his head and pointed at the telephone.

"You may take it that I have not called."

There was a longish silence during which both men lighted cigarettes.

"Monsieur has zen guessed ze subject of ze talk I have had?"

"I could repeat it word for word."

"So. Eet was a very shockeeng story."

"It would be—from that source."

"Eet would seem zat Monsieur has been a naughty boy."

Rentyen thought:

"Come now, that isn't the way an official would talk to a suspect." Aloud he said: "I fail to see how?"

"Eet ees against ze law of France to fight a duel."

Rentyen stroked away a smile. The gesture and the smile both suggested that he was a man far removed from the restraint of laws.

"No doubt, and I am sorry, but when a gentleman's honour is affronted . . ."

Monsieur Frenant bowed gravely. As a Frenchman, he saw nothing funny in the remark. Rentyen went on:

"I did Colonel Culver the injustice of believing that he was afraid to accept my challenge. I perceive, after what has just happened, that I was wrong. He has accepted. His was the choice of weapons and he has chosen—slander. You must advise me how to deal with that."

But while he spoke Rentyen was wondering how far Culver had gone. On the face of it he appeared to have concentrated his attack on purely personal lines. Nothing had been said to suggest that Ascherer's illness had been referred to. If that was so the atmosphere was a trifle clearer.

M. Frenant seemed to have fallen into a reverie. He said:

"As a man of ze world eet ees not deeficult to imagine a motive for zese remarks zat have been

made about you. But of myself I ask zis question: I say M. Rentyen is an actor of ze ver' great *réclame*. Zere ees no doubt in England zat he has many *belles amies*—ze little mistress . . .” Rentyen began to protest, but Frenant calmed him with a flapping hand. “I know! Always ze Engleesh do not admit zese *affaires de cœur*. So I ask myself ees eet probable zat such a man ees so crazy zat he attempt to remove ze husband of one woman? *Non, non, non!* *Nous n'avons pas de raison valable.*”

Rentyen ran the tip of his tongue over his lips.

“So you know about . . .?”

Frenant leant across the table and struck it with his fist.

“Sree time today ees ze story of zis poisoning brought to me. Ze firs, Monsieur Ascherer ring ze phone. Zen zis Colonel Culvere. And now zere ees yourself. Monsieur, eet ees sometimes ze habit of zose who are *en vacance* to make practical ze jokes. But eef ze joke ees to make ridicule of ze police ze laughter will not be so long. What ees zis businees at La Peruse? I demand satisfaction in ze answer you give.”

Rentyen lifted his hands in a despairing gesture.

“Heaven knows, I can't tell you. Probably just a mad idea in the mind of a sick man.”

He felt the little piggy eyes twisting into him like cork-screws.

“Ees Monsieur Ascherer ze sort of man to have mad ideas?”

“In honesty—no.”

“*Très bien.* Eet ees always best to be honest. I give to you annuzzer opportunity. Do you know anybody who might weesh zat Monsieur Ascherer is dead?”

Rentyen squared his shoulders and lied valiantly.

“Not a soul.”

There was an ominous silence, then:

“Monsieur, you surprise me. I myself can sink of several to whom eet would be of great advantage.”

“Not one,” Rentyen repeated.

M. Frenant rose to end the interview.

“Eet ees possible we shall meet again.”

Rentyen bowed.

“I hope for more agreeable reasons.”

“*Nous sommes d'accord.*”

As Rentyen reached the door his name recalled him.

“I have just heard from London zat ze evening papers report zat le Colonel Culvere has retire from ze boards of Monsieur Ascherer’s companies. By your surprise I see zat you do not know, huh?”

“I had no idea.”

“Nevairzeless eet ees significant, huh?”

“I don’t see why.”

“*Non?* But in a mystery of zis kind so much ees significant. *Par example* many would sink eet ees significant zat you, Monsieur, have not yet mentioned ze real reason of your veesit to me.”

“But I . . .”

“Monsieur, *bonjour.* Eet ees of no mattaire.”

Rentyen went out into the sunlight with the humiliating knowledge that his mission had done more harm than good.

## 13.

At five o'clock that afternoon Miles Farady presented himself at The Hermitage and asked for Lord Garaud. He was informed at the desk that Lord Garaud had left a message bidding anybody who called to seek him in "The Kitchen."

"The Kitchen? Why on earth the kitchen? The man isn't a cook."

The desk clerk smiled discreetly.

"Monsieur, the Kitchen at the Casino."

"Of course! Stupid of me!"

He departed with a nod and a few moments later was at the entrance to the Casino, where his progress was barred by two sombre-looking gentlemen in frock-coats. It appeared that there could be no entrance without a card of admission, and to obtain a card it was essential to produce a passport. Farady's explanation that he had not brought a passport and had no intention of playing, but merely desired to meet an acquaintance on a matter of extreme urgency was greeted with a shaking of heads and a recital of regrets. The rules were severe and none could enter but those who observed them to the letter.

Farady's patience was wearing thin and he hung on to the threads of it with difficulty.

"If I write a note would one of you see that it is delivered?"

That, it seemed, was possible, and after a further delay of five minutes Lord Garaud appeared, wearing a most disagreeable expression and carrying in his left hand a few counters of very small denomination.

"It really is most tiresome," he complained. "The middle dozen has come up three times running and I had already made forty-five francs when you dragged me away."

For a man whose income ran into thousands of pounds a year it did not appear as if the extent of his hypothetical gains was excuse enough to justify his ill-humour.

"Well, well, what is it?"

"I have that pathological report. And . . ."

"Give it to me!"

While Farady was producing the document and Garaud was taking it from the envelope and digging in various pockets for his pince-nez, and dropping some of his little brass counters on the floor, he described features of the game from which he had been rapt away.

"That middle dozen run may still be running. There's no earthly reason why it shouldn't. Are you aware that if I had made my bets on the *treize-dix-huit* transversal I should have more than trebled my winnings."

"I imagine you would," said Farady, shortly.

“There is no question of imagining—I should.”

Farady said:

“And if you had had a dozen *en pleins* who knows what you would have made?”

Lord Garaud frowned over the rim of his glasses.

“There is no need to talk like an ass,” said he. “I know quite well that you are all worked-up about this case of yours, but it doesn’t do for a doctor to show excitement. Sooner or later it communicates itself to the patient and then everybody begins to run round in circles. Now then, what’s the fellow say?”

“I was right. It is hæmolytic streptococcus.”

“And I suppose you are very well pleased with your diagnosis and are trying to reach your own back to pat it?”

“Actually,” Farady replied, “I am not half so pleased as you were over those forty-five francs. It doesn’t seem to me a matter for rejoicing. It is about as virulent an infection as a man could have.”

“So nice of you to tell me that,” said Garaud. “I see there is no mention of anything to explain the other symptoms. Perhaps that is what has put you out of humour?”

“Perhaps. All the same I am pretty sure that there was a narcotic.”

Lord Garaud put a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“Would it not be politic, for the peace of mind of everybody concerned, to forget about those other symptoms and concentrate upon what we know exists.

Suspicions and imagination are very apt to run away with a sick man. He sees himself surrounded by bogies that have no existence except in his mind's eye. No man, in my experience, has ever had his life deliberately attempted by the use of germs common in cases of blood-poisoning. In your position, Farady, I should be reluctant to foster or support in the patient's mind any idea that such an attempt was even possible."

He gave the advice in the kindest possible way. But Farady shook his head.

"I realise the strength of what you say, sir; but you were not at that dinner-table last night, as I was. I would not have believed that so much stark hatred could be packed into a single room. What has happened since seems to me the natural consequence of that hatred, and I would be a traitor to my own beliefs if I didn't do all I am able to sift this business to the bottom."

Lord Garaud sighed.

"Have it your own way, young man. But I prophesy that you won't be popular. How is the patient getting on?"

"Badly."

"Got a nurse?"

"Yes—a capital woman. Nurse Gillow. English—Yorkshire."

Garaud nodded.

"Temperature?"

"Hundred and three. But for the strength of his

own will he'd be delirious. The tongue and the throat are swelling appreciably."

"Hm! *Œ*dema of the glottis?"

"Things are moving that way."

"You administered the serum?"

"Twice."

"Has it struck you you may have to tracheotomise?"

"It has, but I am no surgeon."

"You had better get one to stand by. Raymond Demarque is supposed to be the best. If you like I will give him a ring."

"I wish you would."

"I will. Even if he isn't needed to operate he could sign a certificate if the worst comes to the worst. Well, I'll be about if you want me. I might look in after dinner."

Farady hesitated.

"Perhaps you would rather I didn't?"

"No, sir, I'd be only too glad to hand over the case to you—only . . ."

"The patient has other views?"

Farady nodded.

"What did he say?"

"Well, if you insist, sir, he told me to keep that infernal blue tie out of his room."

Lord Garaud smiled wryly.

"A nice lot up at *La Peruse*," said he. "But having been called in on the case I shall see it through."

"Then come to dinner," said Farady. "I can promise that you won't be bored."

“Very well, dinner,” and rattling the counters in the cupped palms of his hands he retreated to see how the middle dozen was faring.

## 14.

Clive Warrant was still in a state of oblivion when Richenda arrived at the house in the *Rue des Petits Champs*. As she passed the half-open door of his bedroom she had a glimpse of the shin of his leg above a concertinaed sock, lying on the crumpled quilt of the bed. The other foot, minus the shoe, dangled on the floor. It was not a pretty picture and Richenda could not avoid a shudder of disgust. A modern painter of abstracts might have used the composition under a cynical title such as “Three Stars,” or “Double X.O.”

Richenda passed on and entered Warrant’s work-room.

The objects with which a man surrounds himself can be faithfully expressive of his character, but it would have needed an investigator of unusual perception to reconstruct a real person from the chaos of Warrant’s belongings and creations. There was nothing in that room to suggest a straight line of thought in any one direction. Here and there were indications of the collector, exemplified by pieces of Oriental porcelain; some early hand-blown wine bottles, and a few walking-sticks of different periods. But these were arranged in no sort of order, but

jostled among the cartons of patent medicines, a microscope, paint brushes, a pestle and mortar, half-used packets of cigarettes, photographs, books and jumble of every description. In one corner of the room was a small aquarium, which, from the filmy rubbish it contained, suggested a casual, but since abandoned interest in pond life. Most of the water had been allowed to evaporate, as was proved by chalky parallel lines round the glass interior. A solitary Marshal Neal rose hung limply over one of the square sides.

Even in the sketches, which littered floors and tables alike, was the same evidence of shiftlessness and lack of a clear intention. For the paper on which they were executed was scrawled over with lines of verse, memoranda, figures and equations.

Richenda looked about her in despair. There was something so degenerate—so utterly run to seed about the spectacle that confronted her. The room might have been the abode of a chimpanzee, from the appearance it presented. Yet Richenda knew that Warrant would thank nobody who attempted to restore order out of chaos. To that twitching, restless mind of his it well might be that chaos was in itself a form of order. In its workings neither reason nor discipline were apparent, yet he still possessed powers of creation and invention that were the envy of lesser intelligences. His brain had lost its grip, but his imagination carried on and contrived after a fashion, to support and sustain the wreckage.

Richenda moved to the window-seat and rested her head against the glass. Outside was the garden, with its blown leaves and rubbish—a fitting avenue of approach to the muddle within. But beyond the garden was the clean white world—swept and garnished—a world of flowers and flowering trees—of white-washed, sunwashed houses—a smiling, beckoning world. And that world seemed to be saying to Richenda that her poor little mission was bound to fail, and that youth should not waste its strength and sweetness in trying to salvage derelicts.

She shut her eyes and her ears.

It was not fair that the world should whisper such disloyalties. It was not fair that it should bid her cut and run.

“He’s my father,” she said, aloud; and repeated: “He’s my father!” But though the words were spoken to strengthen her resolve, they only served to strengthen the realisation that, with all that was best and most loyal in her she was trying to subdue, she wished from the depths of her soul that he was not her father.

No doubt it is very fine and noble for youth to sacrifice itself for the sake of a fellow creature for whom no love is felt. All the way from Rocquebrune to Nice, Richenda had been trying to fortify herself with the slogan that self-sacrifice is its own reward, but now that she was here, with a drunken man asleep in the next room, and with dirt and ruin about her, the reward seemed a long way off.

She paused to ask herself why she had returned—

she who had willingly abandoned this man less than a week before? And in her heart she discovered the answer. She had come back because she was in love. She was in love with Miles Farady. Being in love with him had awakened gentleness and pity for another man. It seemed to make no sense, for now it was Miles that she had abandoned; willingly sacrificing the happiness she had found in being with him in order that she might serve where service was neither asked for nor desired.

She opened her eyes and raised them. Over the biscuit-brown roofs was the smoke-blue profile of the mountains. She had been happy in the open-aired freedom of the mountains—and the hours spent there with Miles for company. A flush of memory touched her cheeks with colour as she remembered waking in the dawn to find his arms round her. It had been fun to brush his tumbled hair with a kiss and steal quietly away before he wakened.

“Now if Miles were here,” she began, and stopped short, for what was the use of sentimental yearnings anyway.

“I guess I’ll get out of this and have some fresh air. Work is the tonic I need.”

So Richenda went downstairs and finding a broom started to sweep up the garden. She had not been long at it when she became aware of a figure leaning over the gate and a voice which addressed her in a Yorkshire accent.

“You aren’t half busy an’ all.”

Richenda stopped sweeping.

"Hullo, Mr. Waring, been having a good time?"

The little man shrugged his shoulders and hung the now empty net bag, which had contained his lunch, on one of the gate-posts.

"Well, I s'pose so. I 'ad a nice sit down on beach 'n' watched waves come in and go out. That was the sum total of it."

"Come in and have a cigarette?"

"I might sit down for a minute, but I won't smoke. Reckon I've been smokin' more than I should." He accepted the chair she offered him and lapsed into it with a sigh. "Made me tongue a bit rough, 'n' I'm not feeling too grand in meself."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's nothing." He raised his chin after the fashion of a bird drinking and rubbed his throat. "What's become of doctor chap who was 'ere?"

"He's gone back."

"That's too bad. You'll be missing him I shouldn't wonder."

"Sort of," said Richenda.

Mr. Waring winked knowingly.

"Going to get spliced, are yer?"

"Why, whatever makes you think that?"

"I didn't need to look twice to see which way wind was blowing. Fair cracked on you that chap is. Come, come, there's nothin' to blush at!"

"Who's blushing?"

Mr. Waring gave a nice round gurgling laugh.

"You fair gave yourself away that time," said he. "I learned about women from my old missus. They're close, women are, and it's no manner of use to heed what they say when you ask 'em a question. If ye're after the truth there's but one way to find it. Watch the colour of their cheeks. If they goes white, you are on right track. If they goes red, it's a bull's-eye."

"You're too clever," said Richenda. "I'll let you into a secret. The reason why modern girls use so much paint is because they're afraid of giving themselves away."

Mr. Waring nodded.

"Well, I wouldn't wonder but what you're right. But there's much to be said for giving yourself away. And that's what you'll do, if you take my advice. You and that young fellow would make a comely pair."

Richenda was rescued from the embarrassment of replying by the telephone bell.

"I must answer that," she said.

Mr. Waring hoisted himself out of his chair.

"'N' I mus' be getting along. See you some other time, maybe."

As Richenda picked up the telephone she heard the clang of the gate closing behind him.

Farady's voice replied to her "Hullo."

"Richenda? Are you all right, my dear?"

"Perfectly."

"And Mr. Warrant?"

"He—he's still asleep."

She felt disloyal in making the admission. How

grand it would have been to be able to say "He's working. He's cutting down a tree. He's carrying coal." Any vital healthy thing. But to say "He's still asleep," with the implication "sleeping it off," was a hateful confession.

Farady said:

"I'm afraid you'll have to wake him up. Mr. Ascherer wants everybody who was here yesterday to dine with him tonight."

"But—but I thought he was ill?"

"Yes, but that's what he wants, and he's very insistent about it. Besides, I want you. The house is a mausoleum without you. Everybody else is coming, and I—I think you—you should try and arrange to come."

There was something peculiar in the way he made the invitation, but Richenda was not concerned with that. She was thinking—"To get out of this atmosphere even for one evening!" She said:

"I had better call you back, hadn't I? No, wait a minute, I can hear him moving now."

Warrant's heavy footfalls came clumping down the stairs. He stopped a few paces from Richenda and pointed at her with a wandering finger.

"Who is that there?" The slurred words sounded like a yawn.

"Richenda. Dr. Farady is on the line."

"Now wish speak to me."

"He's calling for Mr. Ascherer. Mr. Ascherer wants us to dine with him tonight."

Warrant was silent while his face shaped and re-shaped itself into varying patterns of perplexity.

"Ascherer? He's ill, isn't he?"

"He was. Who told you?"

Warrant made a vague gesture.

"You or Rentyen — somebody. I really can't be bothered."

Richenda asked:

"What am I to say?"

Warrant didn't seem to know. He was like a man lost in a fog.

"Something ver' wrong somewhere. I'll . . ."

He waved her aside and went blunderingly to the telephone. "If on'y people'd leave me alone. YES?" The word was shouted into the mouthpiece.

There followed the small sounds of a voice at the other end of the line. Then Warrant said:

"If Paulascherer wants repeat las'night's failure let him. LET HIM. Present my compliments. Say I'll come—COME—with greate possible pleasure."

He slapped down the telephone where he imagined the rest to be; lighted a cigarette from one that was already glued to the corner of his mouth; then, with a broad gesture threw both the old one and the new at a closed window.

"So!" he said, and went upstairs in search of a cigarette.

Richenda watched him go with feelings of loathing and disgust.

## PART III

### I.

IT WAS DUE to Richenda that Warrant presented a semblance of sobriety on their arrival that night at La Peruse. She had spent her time since the invitation had been issued in emptying his glass as fast as he filled it. Warrant had been quite unconscious that she was doing so. His mind was too far removed from anything but its own distorted fancies to bother about her actions. The presence of an empty glass naturally suggested to him that its contents had been consumed by himself, and a kind of alcoholic contentment was induced by the belief. It was as well that the examples of pond life which the little aquarium had contained were extinct for they would never have survived the spirit that Richenda kept pouring into the stagnant water.

During the drive from Nice, Warrant had been fidgety and irritable—grumbling, talking to himself and seemingly unaware that Richenda was with him in the car. It was sad that anybody so lovely as she looked should be so completely ignored.

As they pulled up in the quadrangle before the house Richenda touched his arm, but he snatched it away with startled suddenness.

“Don’t do that. Never do that!”

She said:

“I want you to promise me something. I suppose it is no use to ask you not to drink, but would it be too much to ask you not to get drunk.”

Warrant drew himself up regally.

“My dear Laura,” he began, stopped, blinked at Richenda and added: “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

She said:

“It isn’t very nice for a girl to leave a house with a man who is too drunk to stand.”

“Then why leave the house? No occasion to do so. Far as I’m concerned—stay as long as you like.”

When he was sober enough to talk Warrant had an amazing gift of dignity. He could make himself look like a convention of bishops. The way he walked up the steps and entered the house was tremendously impressive. Richenda, following, wondered if it would be possible to sting him into preserving that dignity for at any rate long enough to get through dinner.

That hope was soon abandoned, for entering the hall where the other guests were already assembled, Warrant made straight for the cocktails and swallowed a couple without even observing the formality of addressing his hostess.

Farady was not present, and looking round the company Richenda was aware that everybody seemed to lie beneath the spell of a common restraint. Venice’s

greeting of her was no more than a lift of the eyebrows,—Rentyen's, the lift of a finger—Renanceau's, a bow, so slight as almost not to have been made—and Culver's, a sluggish upward movement of the head. Nobody spoke, and Richenda found herself absorbed in the silence shared by the rest. They sipped their cocktails and watched each other. Sometimes a throat was cleared—a match was struck, or there was a little cough.

The question that Richenda forced herself to utter was like trying to speak through the throttled silence of a dream.

“Isn’t Mr. Ascherer joining us, then?”

Venice said:

“I think a little later. We are not to wait dinner for him.”

From Warrant came one of his tuneless chants.

“Baa-boom-boom-boom-boom—baam!” but it lacked its usual care-free quality.

Renanceau flashed a swift frown.

“Monsieur should have been a crooner.”

Richenda thought:

“They’re off. It will need very little to start something.”

But Warrant did not appear to have heard. He was busying himself with his third cocktail. Having tasted it he smacked his lips with disrelish and murmured:

“Too much Pernod.”

In the quiet that followed the front-door bell sounded. Richenda saw Venice lift that lily head of

hers and marked a faint line of puzzlement appear upon her forehead. Seeing that she had been observed Venice said:

"I have no idea whom Paul has asked to join us."

The double doors opened and Holmes announced:

"Monsieur Frenant, Préfet of Police."

The small round policeman rolled and twinkled into the room.

Rentyen said:

"Well, well, well!"

Monsieur Frenant bowed over Venice's hand.

"*Enchanté de faire votre connaissance, Madame.*"

Venice smiled an acknowledgment and looked over his head with eyes that asked: "Who is he?"

Rentyen said:

"Ask the Colonel. He rang him up this afternoon."

"Ah, le Colonel Culver," said Frenant, and swooped down on him with both hands extended.

Culver did not accept the hands with any pretence of enthusiasm. Renanceau, after a brief glance at the new arrival, found himself a seat in a recess. Here he sat, watching glassily, and with the thumb of his left hand pressed over one of the valves of his heart. His hands must have been perspiring, for the imprint of his thumb soiled the perfect whiteness of his shirt-front, forming a spot which seemed to grow more and more conspicuous as the evening proceeded.

Farady appeared on the stairs and crooked a finger at Richenda, who turned to Venice. Venice nodded.

"Go, by all means. Paul has been asking for you."

As Richenda started to mount the stairs Holmes announced:

“Doctor Demarque.”

Over her shoulder Richenda saw the new arrival—a lean, dark, olive-skinned man. Through the open door behind him she had a glimpse of his assistant standing beside an operating-room drum and a case of instruments. Farady took her arm and they mounted the stairs together.

Farady said:

“You ran away from us.”

“Only to where I belong.”

“But I don’t understand. When first we met you had run away from where you belonged. Why did you feel that you must go back?”

Richenda said:

“When first we met I had nothing that mattered, so I just went.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s simple. I have something that matters now.”

“Warrant?”

“No—you. I’m in love with you.”

She said it as simply as a child might have said: “I’m hungry.”

“It doesn’t make sense. If it were true you’d have stayed. It doesn’t make sense.”

Richenda replied:

“Yes it does. Before we met I was just sore—angry—my mind had no place to go. Then I found love.”

He screwed up his face.

“And ran away from it?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“But where is the possible sense in that?”

“Love makes people different, of course. Can’t you see?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t begin to.”

“I’ll never be able to explain it any better,” she said.

A nurse was coming down the passage towards them; a small woman, rather thick in the hips, with hair the colour of corn and cigarette ash. She walked as if she meant it. From the bright light in her eyes it was plain that trouble was brewing. Up went her hands to stop the traffic.

Her voice, when she spoke, lifted them out of a house on the Côte d’Azur and tossed them into a Yorkshire dale.

“What’s all this daft talk about dressing-up and going downstairs?”

Farady said:

“That’s the idea, Nurse.”

Nurse Gillow put her hands behind her back and released the knot of her apron strings.

“Right, then I drop case.”

In what appeared to be a single gesture the apron was whipped off and rolled into a convenient form for packing.

Richenda asked:

“Isn’t he fit to come down?”

Nurse Gillow's head began to nod and sway like a china mandarin's.

"If ever I saw death written on a 'uman face," she began.

Farady chipped in quick.

"That'll do, Nurse."

"It'll more than do so far as I'm concerned. I've my reputation to think of even if yours means nothing to you. In all my experience I've never met anything to coom within a mile of it for gormlessness. There doesn't seem to be one among you with the strength to stand up to him."

Farady said:

"I'm sure you're much too good at your job, Nurse, not to realise that some patients have to be humoured. You wouldn't leave us in the lurch?"

Nurse Gillow shook out the folds of her apron preparatory to putting it on again. Reluctantly she said:

"Well, to oblige you . . . but who is it has created the lurch? A man with a temperature like that!"

As they approached the door of Ascherer's room, Richenda instinctively walked on tiptoe. Nurse Gillow, however, showed no disposition to do likewise. With an instinct common to her profession the nearer she was to her patient the more brisk and businesslike she became. Her feet smacked the floor with a swift and hearty rhythm, and her voice crisped with authority.

"Come along, Mr. Ascherer," she said, giving his pillow a short arm punch. "You've been asking for her ever since I came and here she is."

Paul Ascherer's voice, faint and very guttural, said:

"Don't be so efficient."

His head rolled towards the door and he stretched out one of his hands to Richenda.

Dismay at the terrible change in his appearance caused Richenda to hold back a moment before taking it. Nurse Gillow gave her a shove forward.

"And not too mooch talking either," said she.

The door shut quietly as Farady and the nurse went out. Richenda sat beside the bed with one of Ascherer's hands in hers. There came from him in a painful whisper:

"It wasn't that you wanted to hurt me running off like that. It was just because you didn't know."

"That was all. I didn't know," she answered, and reached forward to brush the hair back from his forehead.

He relaxed beneath the touch of her fingers. He did not resent the caress as he had done when Venice touched him. Looking at him Richenda saw thoughts trying to form at the back of his large lavender-coloured eyes. Seemingly they were difficult thoughts with pain standing between them and their formation. She had the impression that his eyes were trying to transmit messages of kindness, but were unpractised in doing so. It was as if the transmitter complained that it

could not handle that particular message. At long last he spoke again:

“You do love me?”

She told herself that here was a very sick man—that probably he was delirious. She nodded slowly, and wondered as she did so, why it was so easy to give that silent lie. For she did not love him. Why should she? They had met less than a dozen times.

Then aloud she added:

“Yes, yes, of course,” and was surprised that she should have willingly endorsed the lie.

After that he seemed very well content. Behind his eyes a new thought began to form. He ticked it out in little words.

“We-learn-values-too-late.” A pause. “Love-so-very-important. . . . Never-neglect-it . . . as-I-have. Ah, ah, ahh!”

The whole sentence was telegraphic. Ac-ac-ac. Message ends. Stop.

Richenda leaned forward, staring. She did not hear Farady come into the room. She felt his touch on her shoulder. Her lips asked a question, but Farady nodded reassuringly.

As she went from the room Ascherer was muttering:

“Of course she loves her father—only natural.”

It was as much as Richenda could do to avoid turning and crying aloud:

“But I don’t—I’ve tried—I can’t—can’t.”

She was thinking of Warrant—of his lolling cigarettes—of the drink—chaos—of the ruin.

As the door shut behind her she rested her head on Farady's chest.

"I feel so out of my depth, Miles."

He pressed a hand to her cheek and his strength seemed to flow into her.

"Silly, aren't I? You'll be standing by."

The pressure of his hand increased.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, Richenda."

His tone seemed to suggest that others might have good cause to fear. She looked in his face for enlightenment, but all he said was:

"You had better go down, my dear. This French doctor will be having a look at him, and I have one or two things that have to be done."

Dr. Demarque passed Richenda on the stairs.

## 2.

It seemed to Richenda that ages passed before Holmes announced:

"Dinner is served."

Lord Garaud had joined the company while she had been upstairs and was quietly talking to Venice on the two subjects which, at that time, afforded him the greatest interest: his cold and the middle dozen. The middle dozen, it appeared, had forsaken him, but the cold remained. He was asking Venice if she could suggest a remedy for it. He expressed a lively interest on learning that one of Mr. Ascherer's companies marketed an inhalent named *Covex*.

"Sounds good; I'll get myself a bottle," he said.

They were still discussing the properties of this nostrum five minutes after dinner had been announced.

It was characteristic of Venice to ignore, as it were, the summons of the gong. At the parties over which she presided, entering the dining-room appeared to be more a matter of accident than of appetite. She would pursue whatever she might be talking about, then casually suggest: "Shall we have dinner?" as if dining was the least important feature of the entertainment.

On this occasion she drew herself away from the *Covex* to say:

"Shall we go in? I'm afraid there aren't enough women to go round, so will everybody sit where they like."

With the gallantry of his race the Marquis de Renanceau shook himself clear of his forebodings and came forward with a bow and the offer of an arm.

Venice laid her fingers on his arm with a smile and a murmured:

*"Beau chevalier!"*

They led a reluctant procession towards the dining-room.

At the head of the table, a pillow behind his head, a rug around him and his hands resting on a paper-pad and pencil which lay in his lap, was Paul Ascherer. The surprise of seeing him there and the ghastly pallor of his face brought from Renanceau a sharp intake of breath.

From Culver came a hushed and throaty: "Good God!" Rentyen stepped back from the doorway to stub out a cigarette of which, for some reason, he had forgotten to rid himself.

Richenda, under her breath, was saying "No, no." She had to fight against a panic yearning to run from the house. The touch of Lord Garaud's fingers on her arm persuaded her forward. Stealing a glance at him she saw that his eyes were focused on the death-mask of their host with purely professional interest.

From Monsieur Frenant had come a swift and protesting clicking of the tongue. He seized the points of his dress waistcoat and gave to each a sharp tug. The silence was intense and the sound of a thread breaking on one of the shoulder seams was plainly audible.

Venice was completely mistress of herself. She lifted her hand from the Marquis's arm and went to her place at the foot of the table as though the occasion offered no unusual features.

The last to enter were Clive Warrant and Demarque. Because of the hesitation of other guests in the doorway, their view of Ascherer, with Farady and the carrying party of footmen gathered behind his chair, was temporarily obscured. As Venice seated herself and Rentyen and the Marquis moved down the room, the gruesome tableau was revealed to them.

Clive Warrant stopped and made a wide encompassing gesture. It was completed with his index

finger pointing accusingly at the dying man. His voice crashed through the silence like thunder.

“Bad art! Bad. Base and spurious.”

Heads swung round. Eyes were glued on him. All movement ceased. Rentyen’s dramatic sense told him that somebody must speak. He took the line himself.

“What is?”

The pointing finger moved in a slow arc.

“This room. Louis Trieze? Pff! Nothing like it. The one perfect example of Louis Trieze was a shooting pavilion near Bailleul. It was struck by a crump before I had time to absorb its perfect proportions. Crump! Poof! Gone.”

With superb confidence he marched down the room and dropped into a chair beside Ascherer—one of the two chairs that everybody else was avoiding.

A breath of relief sighed noiselessly, but the relief was short lived, for Warrant’s eyes were staring at his host and he was saying:

“Not dressed tonight, Paul? Not feeling up to it, perhaps? Too bad.”

Paul Ascherer did not move.

Venice said:

“Next to me, Marquis, please?”

Renanceau grabbed the seat as if it were a life-buoy.

“Colonel!” Rentyen’s provocative note was a semitone too high. It lacked its usual confidence. “Colonel, won’t you?”

He had drawn from the table the chair on Ascherer's left and was offering it in the manner of a *maître d'hôtel*.

Culver glared at him.

"Have it yourself. As Paul is off colour no doubt he'll be glad of a jester."

He had had the best of the encounter and knew it. Rentyen knew it too. But Culver had to try and improve on a minor success. In the war he had lost many men's lives from doing that. He said:

"Unless you think our hostess will feel neglected," and he nodded at the empty place beside Venice.

Venice's smile and the slight shake of her head were exquisitely civilised.

"I'm keeping it for Richenda," and she drew down Richenda beside her.

Rentyen got his second breath.

"I *have* taken it on the chin," he remarked, and had the satisfaction of seeing the blood swelling the veins in Culver's neck.

He was about to sit when Farady leaned forward and whispered something.

"I'm so sorry. Of course."

He relinquished the place to Monsieur Frenant, who nodded a greeting to Ascherer, bumped into the chair and tucked a napkin under his chin.

The servants came in with silver dishes of *oursins*, those little bear cubs of the sea, whose small interiors seem to contain crushed marigolds. They were served with an alternative of "*Huitres Portugaise*." But nobody

bothered what they were eating that night and helped themselves to whatever was offered first.

Culver said:

"These blessed things look like young porcupines to me."

"Wait a minute," rumbled Warrant. "There is a verse about porcupines—or was it hedgehogs? Lessee!" And he quoted:

"Prolonged an' exhaustive researches, by Darwin an'  
Huxley and Ball,  
Have conclusively proved . . . something . . ."

Rentyen said:

"Shall we not bother what they proved?"

The servants went from the room.

Not only Richenda had wondered why Farady remained standing behind Ascherer's chair. This was the moment when she and the rest were to be enlightened.

"As Mr. Ascherer's mouthpiece, it is my job to tell you why you have been asked here tonight. Mr. Ascherer believes that somebody, who is probably in this room, has poisoned him. He also believes that he is going to die."

Lord Garaud said:

"Really, now come!"

"I'm sorry, but I have to go on. Mr. Ascherer claims that up to the present nobody has ever got the better of him, and that he has never been involved in anything he has been unable to understand."

Nobody saw the ever so slight shaking of Venice's head.

Farady went on, dryly.

"That being so, he is curious to find out who and what is the cause of his present condition."

The door was opened by Holmes, heralding the approach of soup. From Ascherer came a minute gesture of dismissal which Farady interpreted.

"Just a minute, Holmes. I'll let you know when."

As the door closed Venice said, sweetly:

"You are being useful, Dr. Farady."

Richenda felt hot all over. Farady went a deep red.

"This isn't my wish, Mrs. Ascherer. I'm only carrying out orders."

Venice said:

"I see. But cold soup is so very . . ." She finished the sentence with a shrug and a salted almond.

Farady squared his shoulders.

"There isn't much more to be said. Mr. Ascherer is of opinion that—that murderers are seldom able to avoid giving themselves away. In asking you here he was anxious, while there is still time, to prove whether that opinion is justified by the facts. Well, that's all." He caught Venice's eye. "May I ring?"

"Oh please."

He rang, and returning to the table, touched Warrant's shoulder.

"Would you mind moving up to the next place?"

He did not notice the sudden frown between

Ascherer's eyes. For Ascherer was waiting to see who would be the first to speak after this amazing announcement. It was an unique opportunity for a guilty man to appear at ease. And now, as the servants entered, everybody was speaking at once, and there was nothing to write on the pad.

"Do you remember those murder parties which were such a craze about four years ago?"

"Silly—morbid, I thought."

Lord Garaud said:

"My youngsters started having them. Smashing things up in the dark. I wasn't long putting a stop to it."

The soup went round. The Marquis sipped noisily. He turned to Culver.

"How is it you come never to *le Tir aux Pigeons, mon Colonel?*"

"I don't know. Not interested. Had enough to do with fire-arms during the war. You're very keen, are you not?"

Renanceau nodded.

"I am never so happy as when I have a gun in my . . ." He stopped, aware that Farady was looking at him, and almost shouted: "A sporting gun."

The pencil in Paul Ascherer's hand began to write.

Renanceau picked up his soup cup, but his hand was unsteady and he set it down with a clatter.

"Pardon, it is so hot," he explained.

Culver moved slowly round in his chair and almost facing Ascherer drank all the soup in his cup.

"I wouldn't have said so," he remarked, and nodded as if to add: "Get round that corner."

As he squared himself to the table his shoulder collided with a champagne bottle from which Holmes was filling his glass. He waved the back of his hand at it.

"No wine for me."

Rentyen was on to it like a terrier after a rat.

"Not drinking, Colonel? And after what you said last night?"

There was a silent challenge of the eyes.

Venice asked:

"What *did* you say last night? Men always are at their best when no women are present."

"I have no recollection."

Venice turned to Rentyen.

"You tell us."

Rentyen shook his head.

"It would lose its point without the Colonel's vigorous style." His eyes flashed upward to where Holmes hovered with the bottle. "Thanks Holmes, yes. In a tumbler, if I may? I'm in a vulgar mood. I want to put back my head and pour."

Renanceau was under better control. With eyes half-closed and fingers drumming as an aid to memory, he mused aloud.

"*Ah, j'en ai!* The Colonel says of those who drink too much that they cannot keep a secret. It is very true."

Ascherer handed a slip of paper to Farady, who read aloud:

"The secret of last night's telephone call to London, for example!"

Culver pretended not to have heard. Once more Ascherer began to write.

The movements of his hand were slow and painful, and reacted over a wider margin than the paper-pad. Each scratch of the pencil screwed up the nerves of the company to an unbearable tension.

Richenda watched, fascinated like a bird under the woven spells of a snake. She had a ghastly illusion that he was not there, and that the chair at the head of the table was occupied by a tragic and malicious idea. The man had lost reality. He had become a thing of phosphorus—a green and mildewed light without edges. A shiver started at her toes and ran through her limbs. She thought:

"I shall scream. . . . I shall . . ."

Venice's hand closed on her wrist—cool, firm, reassuring. And Venice was saying:

"That frock of yours is charming. New York?"

The spell was broken. Richenda dragged her eyes away from the chair of horror and managed to smile.

"Yes. How clever of you."

"Why do Americans ever bother to buy clothes in Paris?" said Venice. "I have bought the loveliest gowns in New York."

They were all grateful for the diversion. Lord Garaud filled his lungs like a man who had been under water. He said:

“Always wanted to visit America, but Lady Garaud won’t move. Any excuse to stay at home satisfies her. She wouldn’t even join me down here. Wanted to see some hyacinths come up which she has in a window-box. Reminds me, I must take her back a present of some kind.” He touched a white vanity bag with a clasp of *cabochon* rubies and sapphires, which lay between Venice and himself. “This is nice.”

Ascherer went on writing.

Venice said:

“I’m so glad you like it. It came from Duchesne’s by the Casino. It is a pretty bag.”

Lord Garaud nodded.

“Delightful. Cost a good deal of money, I’ll be bound. Some sort of leather, eh?”

“No, snake skin.”

“LIZARD!” Napier Rentyen hit the word much too hard. The rider: “Isn’t it?” failed to soften the over-emphasis of which he had been guilty.

With an eye on Ascherer and with womanish intuition, Renanceau remarked, innocently:

“Monsieur would know?”

From Culver came a satisfied “Ah!” which sounded like a belch; then he too turned to be sure that Ascherer had not missed the significance of Renanceau’s rapier play.

Ascherer went on writing.

Venice was unmoved. She said:

“Napier and I often exchange presents. It’s more

fun than buying things for oneself. Show Lord Garaud that little *briquet* I gave you."

From a waistcoat pocket Rentyen produced a lighter made of onyx and platinum. He flashed it with his thumb and a flame spurted.

"Light in our darkness," he said.

Lord Garaud nodded a "very pretty." Culver put out a hand.

"May I look?"

He took it and frowned at the initial.

"F. Why F?"

"Ah," said Rentyen, "that is a mystery. On the other hand an F on a trinket of yours would be no mystery at all."

From Ascherer came a dreadful crackling sound which would have been a laugh.

Culver said:

"So you and your hostess exchange presents? How nice. Are you equally generous to other people?"

Rentyen's smile was dazzling.

"But, my dear fellow, I gave you something this afternoon. Don't you remember? I was afraid at the time that you didn't like it. You seemed so upset."

The fish had been served and the servants were absent from the room.

Culver heaved himself up on the arms of his chair.

"You had better come outside with me."

Paul Ascherer raised his pencil. Farady said:

"Mr. Ascherer does not wish anybody to leave the table."

But Culver was past caring.

"I can't help what he wishes. I have had more from that mountebank than I've put up with from anybody in the whole of my life. I mean to break his back across my knee."

Monsieur Frenant swallowed his last piece of fish and laid a persuasive hand on Culver's arm.

"As *Préfet de Police* I cannot permeet violence. *Sans doute*, Monsieur Rentyen ees provoking—but are not we all? Be *tranquille*, Monsieur le Colonel! Een your own interest you would not weesh to appear on zis night of all as one who desires to keel. *Non, non*, zat would be too great a folly. No doubt you are angry zat you 'ave had your name remove from ze companies of Monsieur Ascherer but . . ."

"Who told you that?" Culver roared.

"We 'ave ze liaison wiz London and . . ."

"If you have been inquiring into my affairs . . ."

"Eet ees my business to inquire . . ."

"That's just like the police. I tip you off where you might find out something and instead . . ."

"Monsieur, zat weel do! Zere is a proverb you would do well to remember: *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.*" And Frenant gave emphasis to the words by rapping his knuckles smartly on the table. He added, as an afterthought: "Ees Monsieur interested in insurance?"

Culver turned the colour of a Stilton cheese and slumped back in his chair.

Ascherer cackled for the second time.

Like thunder rumbling in the hills came the voice of Warrant.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but is there not a slight—ver' sligh' spirit of discord in our midst. If there was anything in my glass, which there isn', I would drink to peace and goodwill."

Servants entered with a dish of quails.

As Venice helped herself she remarked:

"What wonderful luck you had at the tables last night, Marquis."

"On the contrary, Madame, I had no luck last night. I was so fooleesh as to believe that a dream had come true. But these things do not happen." His eyes strayed towards the chair at the head of the table and his upper lip curled back in a sneer.

"But surely you won?"

"*Mais non, Madame*, it was not I who won."

"Then you played again later?"

"And lost, Madame."

"All that?" said Venice.

"Much more. For last night I lost what I believed I had regained."

"What was that?"

A single tear ran down the Marquis' wrinkled cheek.

"My self-respect, Madame."

And Venice had meant so well. It was impossible to say a thing that did not twist itself into some new tragedy or ugliness. For one of the few times in her life she looked at her husband pleadingly.

"Paul, you must be terribly tired. Let the servants take you back to your room?"

He took no more notice of her than if she had not spoken. His head was sunk on his breast and he went on writing. With an almost hysterical note in her voice she added:

"You might answer."

Farady said:

"I don't think he can, Mrs. Ascherer," and touched his throat.

In the hush that followed Venice pressed her fingers to her temples. She thought:

"Whatever happens I must not let go."

Lord Garaud said:

"You've a wonderful cook. These quails are delicious."

Rentyen never knew what persuaded him to add:

"A quail is one of the things that is better dead." He could have bitten out his tongue for being such a fool.

Paul Ascherer put the slip of paper on which he had been writing before Farady. It was in the form of a *questionnaire*. Farady looked at it and frowned.

"You can't want me to . . ." he began.

Ascherer nodded. His face seemed to have sunk since he came to table. He looked terribly old and weary.

"Well, if I must." Farady took a deep breath and addressed Renanceau. "Marquis, Mr. Ascherer in-

structs me to thank you for putting the facilities of the hospital at our disposal."

"*Il n'y a pas de quoi.*"

Farady glanced at the paper.

"As president of the hospital you spend a great deal of time there?"

Renanceau looked puzzled.

"I have my committees."

"Quite so. And as president naturally you have access to all the departments?"

"*Mais certainement.*"

"Is there a bacteriological department? A laboratory where there might be cultures?"

"*Oh oui.*"

"Which, no doubt, you visit from time to time—or could? I mean nobody would think it strange if you turned up there and took an interest in . . ."

From Rentyen came:

"Steady! That's going too far."

Farady said: "Why did you pick up Mr. Ascherer's glass in his study last night?"

The Marquis de Renanceau sprang to his feet. His eyes were glittering like rapier points.

"Body of a dog," he cried, "does he come to this? To all of your questions yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes. And now I tell what you do not ask. This man—this vampire, he gets me in his power so that I lose Renanceau." His voice rose and filled the room with trembling waves of anger. "I am beaten—I am humble—with bowed head and bloody I accept my

defeat. But last night comes a whisper from my brave ancestors 'Win it back for us!' It is a call—a challenge—and I respond. With the last penny I have in the world I go to the tables and I win. I win enough to buy Renanceau twice times over. This money I lay in a heap before him, and what does he do? He laughs. He laughs—this satyr. He will not sell me back the honour I have lost. He drives me away a beaten man. But I am no longer humble. There is a savage in my breast which cries to me to kill—kill. I am before the house. The curtains of his room are parted. In my hand is a pistol. In one minute he will be dead. Then comes this young man, this Faradie, and my chance is lost. I do not deny that I wish him dead. I confess this, and proudly. But we Renanceaus kill with steel or lead, and not with filthy germs. Paul Ascherer is going to die and I would to heaven I could say it was by my own hand."

Monsieur Frenant had half-risen, but Ascherer poised a finger and motioned him back into his chair. With a sound like broken cog-wheels turning in a derelict machine he uttered the words:

"He didn't do it."

Then with dreadful slowness he straightened himself and bowed to the man he had beaten. The effort cost him dearly for as he flopped back in his chair he was shaken by convulsions and the breath rattled in his throat like dice in a box.

In an instant the three doctors went into action. Lord Garaud took command.

"Where are those footmen? Come on, you fellows. Pick him up, chair and all, and get him out of here."

Demarque had already plunged from the room to where his assistant had made all ready in case he had to operate.

"Hurry now, if you don't want him to suffocate."

As the chair with its gasping occupant was carried from the room, Clive Warrant slumped across the table dead drunk. Even Richenda's voice, high, wild and crying: "You're beasts—all of you—beasts—beasts!" failed to wake him.

Rentyen looked pityingly at Venice.

"Poor devil! And he'll never know," he said.

Venice did not seem to hear.

### 3.

They waited. Demarque was operating. A hush had fallen on the house, through which the tap and squeak of Nurse Gillow's shoes was the only articulated sound. From the hall below they had a blue and white glimpse of her as she hurried to carry out some duty.

By common consent they had gathered in the hall, for there is something which persuades people to keep within earshot when an operation is taking place. Even the furniture seemed to be listening.

At the shutting of a door in a distant part of the house heads were lifted and lips moistened. After that the silence inspissated.

There are certain silences, in particular those of acute tension, that create a music of their own—a thin, quivering music, like the pinging of a mosquito—a minute banshee that has for its undertones the throb-throb of blood in the listener's temples and the whistling of breath.

Richenda's eyes were fastened on the stairs and once she thought she could see a misty figure mounting on tiptoe. She dropped her eyes to find that Venice was at her side holding one of her hands. Gratefully she gave the hand a little pressure.

Venice whispered:

“You should never have been brought into this.”

“If I could do anything,” she replied.

Venice leaned a little nearer.

“I have had Mr. Warrant put in his car and sent home. One of the footmen has gone with him.”

“Thank you,” said Richenda. It was a relief to know that she would be spared that drive with Warrant toppling against her at every corner of the winding road. But in opposition to that relief was the voice of conscience asking: “Are you pulling your weight?” She looked at Venice with furrows between her eyes. “Do you think I ought . . .”

Venice said:

“As you wish, my dear.”

“Then I'll stay a little—at any rate until . . .”

Venice nodded.

Rentyen was fiddling with his cigarette case. Without thinking he held it out to Culver.

“Cigarette?”

“Thanks.”

Rentyen flashed his lighter and offered it. Culver saw the initial, was reminded; waved it away and dropped the cigarette into the grate.

The Marquis de Renanceau was watching Venice. He was seeking to divine what manner of woman was hidden behind her marble grace and immobility. Was her heart also of marble? If her husband should die, would she turn a deaf ear to his entreaties? Her voice had been gentle when she spoke to him at table. Was there also a gentleness of soul, or would she pursue the scheme to strip the ancient glories from Renanceau and . . . and . . .? It was incredible that he should have put the question into words at such a time as this. He of all men—he the pattern of chivalry, and in manners and deportment the observed of all observers.

“Madame, if you have a heart I beg you will not do this thing. If Monsieur Ascherer dies and if . . .?” He could not believe that it was he who had spoken.

Venice’s eyebrows arched like bridges in the Grand Canal.

“Marquis, surely . . .”

He bowed his head.

“*Je demande pardon, Madame,*” and he covered his face and shivered.

In a voice as brittle as a glass Rentyen said:

“Let’s have a window open.”

Through the wide square of the opened window

nights scents filtered into the room. Rentyen filled his lungs. And then an eerie thing happened. The window curtains stirred, were sucked outward, floated for a moment like banners in a wind, drooped and hung motionless.

From Frenant came three words:

*“Il est mort.”*

Renanceau crossed himself.

After a while Farady and Lord Garaud came down the stairs. For Farady's ear alone Garaud said:

“There is something to be learned by seeing how not to do a thing.”

He approached Venice. Question and answer passed between them in silence.

“I am very, very sorry,” he said.

Rentyen muttered:

“God! Poor old Paul!”

He wiped the corners of his mouth with a handkerchief.

Ascherer was dead and it was hard to believe that he had ever hated him, or resented the agility of his mind, or the obstacle he had created between Venice and himself. Paul Ascherer in dying had opened the gates of freedom, but viewed through those open gates freedom had not a very spacious look. It was haunted by threatening shapes woven together by a network of rumours and whispered suspicions. The shapes were pointing with long fingers and nodding among themselves. In imagination he could hear their rustling words: “There he is! Over there! That

man! He did it! She did it! No, he did it. Paul Ascherer's spies were living after him.

And, blindingly, Rentyen realised that Paul Ascherer dead was a greater menace than he had been in life. There had been a kind of macabre excitement in defending themselves against the suspicions of a living man, but that excitement had been transformed by death into apprehension and even dread.

So Rentyen wiped the corners of his mouth and felt his heart grow cold beneath his ribs.

The Marquis de Renanceau had not raised his eyes from the floor. No voices whispered to him that all was well. Very, very much alone he felt. He no longer feared that Venice would refuse to sell back his estates; only, only . . . he could not choose but wish it had been from Ascherer himself that he had regained them.

Culver thought:

"He has died twenty-four hours too late. What have they printed about me in those evening papers? If these doctors could be persuaded to certify that his mind was unhinged. . . ." He stole a glance at Garaud. "Unsympathetic looking devil." There was something about the sloppy cut of Garaud's clothes, with their disregard for personal vanities, which did not encourage the hope that he would respond to—well, being put on to something good as a return for services rendered.

Culver checked that line of thought abruptly, for if anything would focus suspicion on himself of being

the cause of Ascherer's death, it would be a suggestion of that kind.

Farady had moved to Richenda's side and put an arm round her.

"This has been awful for you."

"No worse than for the rest. What happens now?"

Farady shrugged his shoulders.

"We doctors will have a conference with this policeman, I suppose."

Richenda caught her breath in a dry sob.

"Miles, do you believe what he believed?"

"That somebody killed him? Yes, I do."

She put a hand on his arm.

"Oh, my dear, must you? Must it go on? Just think, all these people going about under a terrible suspicion. And it may not be true, Miles. And if it is true, could it be proved?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know. But I'm a doctor and a doctor's job is to protect life and defend it. I shall have to stick to my guns."

Richenda said:

"It has never seemed fair to me that innocent people should suffer for the guilty. If you prove that he was murdered but cannot prove by whom, think what it will mean."

"I can't help that, Richenda."

"You're obstinate—and rather cruel."

"I'm doing my job. Mr. Ascherer hired me to protect his body, and I promised to do so."

"Did he ask you to avenge it?"

"I must do what I think is right. As you have."

"I?"

"When you left me to go back to your father."

"I went because he was helpless."

"The dead are even more so," said Farady.

It was no use. He was a man whose mind was made up. She turned away as Dr. Demarque appeared. Frenant met him at the foot of the stairs and the two went into a whispered consultation. In response to a crooked finger they were joined by Farady and Lord Garaud. The four men retreated to the study and closed the door behind them.

Rentyen broke the silence that followed.

"The jury will now consider its verdict."

Culver went heavily towards the drinks' table. He said:

"I'll bet somebody in this room isn't feeling too happy."

"I, for one," said Rentyen, simply. Then: "Venice, dear, can I get you anything?"

"A little soda water, perhaps."

As Rentyen lined up beside Culver at the table he said:

"If you've any fast ones to get off your chest, Colonel, now's your time. With poor Paul lying dead upstairs I'm not competing."

"Humph! Going to make out he was your dearest friend, I suppose?"

"No, my dearest enemy. When you've done with the syphon, if you don't mind."

“Take it and be damned,” growled Culver.

The fighting lights blazed in Rentyen’s eyes, but his will subdued them.

“Let it pass,” said he.

Culver moved to where Venice stood. She was very still and seemed lost to her surroundings.

“I should have thought the proper place for you is at your husband’s bedside.”

“I wonder,” she answered. “He did not encourage me to come to his room when he was alive. Should I affront a dead man?”

“Well, if you don’t mind people thinking it queer!”

“I don’t mind what people think. It’s what they are that matters.”

“No affair of mine,” said Culver. “Just struck me as being a pity.”

Venice nodded.

“It’s all a pity,” she agreed, and took the glass Rentyen offered her with a flicker of a smile.

Culver moved to the window, putting Richenda to flight. She heard Rentyen saying to Venice:

“You seem so far away, my dear.”

“I was thinking, Faun. I was trying to think something nice for Paul. I would like him to have had a nice thought to take on his journey; something he could have opened, as we open a parcel of sandwiches, and had the surprise of seeing that they—that it was what he wanted. That dinner tonight has made it so difficult—almost impossible. A sort of identification parade! Not a pleasant last memory, Faun. Not a

very fertile soil to grow nice thoughts in." She gave a little sniff, put finger-tips to her eyes, then looked at the tears that wetted them. "Why, I believe I'm crying. Perhaps a few tears would do instead."

Holmes came in and softly addressed Richenda.

"A Mr. Waring is asking for you on the telephone, Miss."

Richenda repeated: "Waring? Oh yes. I'll come."

#### 4.

Richenda returned from the telephone as the study door opened and the four men appeared. Lord Garaud came to Venice and apologised for their absence. He explained that they had gone very thoroughly into the circumstances of the case and that Monsieur Frenant, after hearing what medical evidence was available, inclined to believe that Mr. Ascherer may have been suffering from delusions as to the cause of his death.

"For my own part," said he, "I should be quite willing to say that the patient died from œdema of the glottis resulting from very acute blood-poisoning." His eyes strayed in the direction of Demarque and he added: "If the operation had been expedited it is just possible he might have survived, but it was very much a case of emergency. The patient suffocated before tracheotomy was completed. Dr. Demarque did all he could in very trying circumstances. He, too, is quite ready to sign a certificate of death from natural causes."

“And Dr. Farady?” Venice asked.

Lord Garaud hunched his narrow shoulders.

“We have to remember that Dr. Farady was greatly influenced by his patient’s point of view. He is still sceptical and unconvinced. However, two signatures on the certificate should suffice. There will be an inquest, I imagine, but it is unlikely to shed much fresh light on the matter. We must hope that no unpleasant rumours get into the papers.”

Venice turned to the *Préfet de Police*.

“Monsieur Frenant,” she said, “unless you are satisfied that my husband died naturally, please do everything to see that justice is done, however unpleasant it may be for any of us.”

He came and stood before her.

“And what are your beliefs, Madame?”

“I have an open mind.”

“*Moi aussi*,” said he, and bowed stiffly from the waist. “I now go to make ze arrangements necessairy. Ze body will be removed, but I trust to incommode as leetle as possible.”

He had reached the door when Culver stopped him with a question.

“I’m intending to return to England tomorrow. I take it you have no objection.”

Monsieur Frenant did not reply at once, what time his little piggy eyes scrutinised Culver’s features closely.

“That is a mattaire of discretion razzaire zan of objection.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“*Bon soir, Monsieur.*”

Culver began to bluster.

“There is no absolute necessity for me to go. I mean if you’d prefer . . .”

But Frenant had left the room.

Culver swung round on Farady.

“We have you to thank for this!”

Venice took her head in her hands.

“And so it goes on,” she said, “and will go on—and on.” With a little staggering breath she ran up the stairs. Rentyen took a step as if to follow and stopped, with clenched hands.

“It’s so damned unfair,” he cried, turned and went into the garden.

Down the steps he strode head up and his eyes fixed on the oceans of stars that spangled the sky.

“You up there, do something, *please*? Living or dead no man has the right. . . . Don’t you see? You must do *something*.”

He left the path and waded through flowers and bushes. Presently he found himself at the back of the marble pavilion where the night before he and Venice had met. Here he stopped and rested his head against its cool surface.

“If there was anything that I could do—*anything*.”

And there he remained held in a brain rack where the one clear thought was his love for Venice and the need and the determination to protect her from the awful suspicion that shadowed the rest of them.

He did not notice the sound of the cars which took away Demarque and Lord Garaud. He noticed nothing until he heard voices and footsteps approaching.

Farady was saying:

"You wouldn't think much of me if I denied my own convictions."

"We are talking in circles," Richenda replied. "If you can't see the injustice of what you are doing, what is the use? Let's go back to the house."

"I'll borrow a car and drive you home."

But she did not move, and Farady said:

"You might try and see my point of view. It's awful for a man when the girl he loves won't even try."

There was silence, then:

"Miles, if you could say it was Napier Rentyen, Colonel Culver, the Marquis who killed him, that would be different; but you can't. There is no evidence."

"The evidence may turn up."

"And until it does all the rest must suffer to satisfy your belief in what is right. Don't you see you may be starting something that nobody will ever be able to live down?"

"They must take their chance."

"You won't give them a chance."

Then Farady said:

"Suppose your father had been killed would you be so ready to let the murderer get away with it? The dead man was practically a stranger so you don't care."

Richenda replied:

"I think we owe more to the living than to the dead." She stopped and started again. "I had forgotten. You must drive me to Nice at once. While you were talking in the study Mr. Waring rang up."

"Waring, I've never heard of him."

"The little man who brought along the letter this morning. He's ill and asked if you could come and see him."

Farady shook his head.

"Tomorrow'll do for that."

"I see. The living don't matter," said Richenda, coldly.

"That isn't fair. He's probably just a hypochondriac. Some men can't see a doctor without pouring out their symptoms."

Richenda said:

"Don't bother, then. I'll get a taxi."

"I just can't be right, can I?" said Farady. "What's the old chap think is the matter with him?"

"A sore throat and he said his tongue felt funny. Miles, why are you looking at me like that? Why are you holding my wrist?"

From his place of concealment Rentyen heard Farady's sharp-drawn breath and marked the sudden excitement in his voice.

"Say that again. A sore throat and his tongue felt funny."

"I don't understand."

"Give me a minute. Don't talk. Give me a

minute.” He released her wrist and hammered his forehead with the palm of his hand. “That was how it started with Mr. Ascherer. But how could the two link up? There isn’t a thing . . . Wait! Come and sit down.” He drew her into the pavilion and thrust her on to the stone seat.

Rentyen moved a little so as to hear what was being said.

“Listen, Richenda, it’s the maddest notion but it may be right. Those sketches of Warrant’s. I gave them to Ascherer last night. They were in a stamped and addressed envelope. After looking at them Mr. Ascherer had them put in the post. But the letter was delivered to the wrong address. It was opened by old Waring who brought it to us after licking down the flap. . . . He told us that. Don’t you remember? He told us he had *licked down the flap*.”

“Stop,” cried Richenda, and there was terror in her voice. “I don’t know what you’re trying to prove, but stop.”

Farady took her by the wrists again.

“You were in the room when Warrant tried to burn the letter.”

“It was because of his eyes—because he believed he would be unable to work.”

“How do you know that? He didn’t say so. How do you know that there wasn’t a far more terrible reason to destroy it than that.”

“No. It’s a lie. He’s my father—my father. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

But a white light of understanding flooded Farady's brain and blinded him to her sufferings.

"Years ago Warrant was interested in organic chemistry. It wouldn't be difficult for such a man to smear a germ culture on the gum of an envelope. I read a story once . . ."

Richenda cut him short.

"No, no, it's not true. They were friends. There was no motive."

"You saved that letter from the fire. Where is it?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't tell you if I knew."

"You do know. You brought it here with you. When you ran away this afternoon you left your things behind."

"No."

"I saw them lying about in your room through the open door less than an hour ago. I want that letter."

"You can't have it. I threw it away. I burnt it."

"Wherever it is I mean to have it. Don't you realise that another man may die because of what may have been in the gum of that envelope?"

"I hate you—hate you——" she cried, and Rentyen waited to hear no more.

Swiftly as he dared he picked his way through the bushes and made for the house. The hall was deserted and he leapt up the stairs three at a time. The door of Richenda's room was open and he locked it behind him.

On the floor beside the dressing-table was a suit-case and in the pleated silk envelope on the underside of

its cover he found what he sought. There could be no doubt of that for nearly a quarter of the envelope containing the sketches was burnt and charred. Rentyen held it as if it were a snake, at the length of his arm.

“You’re out of the wood, Venice,” he said aloud, but like an extinguished fire the light died out of his eyes; for of the poisoned flap of the envelope not so much as one particle remained.

## 5.

Rentyen wasted no time in despair. The evidence had been destroyed, but there remained his abilities as an actor backed by a busted flush.

He thought: “I need only show part of the envelope—and with his eyes in their present state there is still a chance.”

He thrust the envelope in his breast-pocket and went from the room. He was just in time, for as he approached the stairs Richenda was coming up. The lines of her mouth were set and her eyes fastened on him in an expression at once suspicious and inquiring.

His casual inquiry: “Off to bed?” was a little overdone.

Richenda shook her head and went on in the direction of her room. At the foot of the stairs Farady was waiting like a sentry.

“Damn the fellow!” Rentyen thought. “If he keeps me even for a minute and she finds the envelope

has gone, she'll guess I've got it and the game'll be up. Mustn't risk that."

Then he remembered the service staircase just beyond his bedroom. With a wave of the hand and a "Good night, Farady," he went round the angle of the corridor and walked into the arms of Culver, who said:

"Come into my room for a minute."

Rentyen moved this way and that.

"Not now. Presently."

Culver said:

"We're in a sticky place, Rentyen. This is no time for private animosities."

Rentyen said:

"Quite—agreed and too true; but if you wouldn't mind letting me pass, I'm not feeling well."

Culver's hand fastened on the lapel of his coat.

"Come in here. Can't hurt you to talk things over."

"Yes it can. I've got a pain. Oh, all right then, but only for one minute."

With every nerve protesting against the delay, he allowed himself to be drawn into Culver's room and pushed into a chair.

It had taken Richenda less than five seconds to find that the envelope was gone and to guess who had taken it. Farady had not been aware of the sound of somebody moving through the bushes behind the pavilion, but Richenda had heard. That was why she had suddenly consented to get the letter, as she had said: "If only to prove that you are wrong."

"And you'll bring it to me?" he insisted.

"Yes."

"On your honour?"

"On my honour."

"Come on, then."

Her conscience suffered no pangs at the knowledge of what she meant to do. He should have the letter, but not until she had done what the fire had saved her the trouble of doing—destroyed the poisoned flap. The obvious hatred which Warrant felt for her did not influence that decision. He was her father and she would not let him suffer for whatever crime he had committed through any action of hers.

But the letter was gone.

Richenda was not the kind of girl whose faculties were diminished in the presence of an emergency. An emergency tended to quicken them. She asked herself what Rentyen would do now he was in possession of the evidence, and she had not a shadow of doubt that he would lose no time in confronting Warrant with it and trying to force from him a confession. He would be actuated by the desire to clear Venice from suspicion and was certain to choose the most dramatic way of doing so.

She drew back the curtains and stepped on to the balcony. The driveway leading to the garage was empty and there had not been time for Rentyen to cover as great a distance as she could see since they had passed each other at the top of the stairs. It was

probable, then, that he had delayed to speak to Venice. In that case . . .

Richenda looked down into the garden. The distance was not very great. Twelve to fourteen feet, and there were the sinuous boughs of a magnolia which might be trusted to support as light a weight as hers. She dared not use the stairs for Farady was waiting in the hall and his resolution that justice should be done was as strong as her will to frustrate it. It was a little hard, she thought, that she must defeat a man she loved for the sake of one for whom she had no real affection. She fetched a coat and dropped it on to the flower-bed below; climbed the stone balustrade, gripped the magnolia vine and let herself drop. The ground rose up and received her gently. She picked up her coat and keeping in the shadow of the trees she began to run.

Rentyen had risen from the chair into which Culver had thrust him.

“All of which I do most devoutly believe,” said he. “On the other hand, Colonel, this pain is pressing. I’ll see you later.”

In the haste of his exit he forgot his intention to use the service stairs. He went by the main staircase. In the hall was Farady, interviewing four men in white uniforms who had called to collect the body of the deceased and take it to where the autopsy was to be performed.

Farady said:

“Rentyen. I shall want to talk to you.”

Rentyen said:

“Nothing I’d like better,” and went out, passing an ambulance which stood in the courtyard. “Whew!” he sighed and made for the garage.

His car, with its sheeted-in back seat, was parked behind one of Ascherer’s monstrous limousines. Five minutes, and many imprecations were exhausted before he succeeded in moving the one to reach the other. The self-starting mechanism of the limousine defeated him and he had to shove the infernal thing out of the way. His heart was beating like a kettle-drum when at last he took the road.

“And I ought to be careful of my heart, too,” he reflected.

Farady led the procession of bearers up the stairs and before taking them into the dead man’s room he rapped on Richenda’s door.

“Stay where you are until I let you know,” he said.

The bearers did their job with decency and despatch, and when the body had been removed Farady addressed Nurse Gillow, trim and ready to depart in a long blue cloak and a straw bonnet.

“Tired, Nurse?”

“If I was I wouldn’t admit it.”

“I was wondering if you would be ready to tackle another case tonight.”

Nurse Gillow eyed him cautiously.

“If it’s such another as this last I’d be loth to say yes.”

"The symptoms may be," said Farady, "but not the patient. He is a little old chap from Yorkshire."

"Well, come, that sounds a bit more 'uman."

"I shall want to start almost at once. Collect the stuff we've been using here. The hypodermic, the serum and all the rest of it. Quick as you can."

He went out, knocked at Richenda's door and went in. The room was empty and the window wide open. He went on to the balcony and looked down. In the flower-bed below were the footmarks of a forced landing. He thought:

"I ought to have known that she'd try something like that."

He wasted no more time. From the corridor he called to Nurse Gillow and they went down the stairs together. As they reached the hall Culver shouted from above:

"Seen Rentyen anywhere?"

"He went into the garden a few minutes ago."

"The garden? I don't think that can be right."

Farady said:

"Tell Mrs. Ascherer I'm taking one of the cars to Nice. I may be out all night."

He thrust Nurse Gillow through the door ahead of him.

"It's for all the world like a madhouse," she complained.

Farady said:

"Let's hurry," and scowled. He thought: "I

ought to go straight to the police. I would too, if I had the guts of . . . if I wasn't so crazy about her."

What a pest a sense of duty can be to a man.

He climbed into the driving seat of the big limousine, started it up and backed it out of the bushes where Rentyen had left it marooned.

"Fine way to park a car," he grumbled.

They took the Moyen Corniche, there being less traffic on that route. Nurse Gillow settled back to enjoy herself.

"Luvly bowling along in the dark with all them stars overhead," she said. "Makes a nice change after watching by a death-bed."

Farady said nothing. He was busy with his thoughts. Nurse Gillow folded her hands placidly on her lap. She was quite indifferent to the speed at which the corners were being taken.

"And what might be the name of my new patient?"

"Waring, I think; yes, Waring. You ought to make a good team—Waring and Gillow."

She thought it over.

"Is that a joke, then?"

"More or less. There's a big department store in London called Waring and Gillow."

"Hm! I don't know that I'd get much of a laugh outta that."

"Sorry, it's the best I can do," said Farady.

He drove on in silence.

## 6.

As Rentyen pulled up before the villa in the *Rue des Petits Champs* it occurred to him that the crusade on which he had embarked was one that might be accompanied by considerable peril. His object was to bluff Warrant into an admission of guilt, and assuming Warrant to be a murderer, it was reasonable to suppose that his actions, on being confronted with the charge, would be violent and possibly lethal.

Rentyen was unarmed and it is to his credit that the danger he invited in no way diminished his intentions.

As the gate shut behind him he experienced those sensations of excited curiosity that an actor feels on the first night of a new play. His thoughts might have been condensed into the phrase "How'll it go?"

There was a light in the window of Warrant's room and a shadow which moved to and fro across the blind. Rentyen collected a handful of dried earth and tossed it at the square of light.

The shadow ceased to move, bulked large and the blind went up with a little roar. Warrant opened the window and looked down, dizzily.

"Whozzat?"

"It's Rentyen. Open up, will you?"

"There is'n a drink in the place."

"Never mind."

"Right."

Presently Rentyen heard the slow and clumsy descent of the stairs.

"Seems to have sobered up," he thought, and was thankful. Perhaps Clive Warrant's pass out at the dinner-table had been an effect.

The door opened and Warrant reeled back with it to allow his guest to enter.

Rentyen shook his head.

"No. Come along in my car. Want to take you somewhere."

Warrant had no suspicions. He said:

"Ver' sound idea. No cig'rettes either. Hopeless position."

"I've stacks."

He piloted Warrant to the car and heaved him into the front seat. As they turned into the main thoroughfare Rentyen had a glimpse of an approaching car which he recognised as Ascherer's limousine. He took the corner sharply and was out of sight before Farady turned into the *Rue des Petits Champs*.

"Is this where our patient lives," asked Nurse Gillow as the car pulled up outside number 17.

Farady shook his head.

"No. I must ask you to wait. I may be some time."

"I see. Then Mr. Waring isn't an urgent case."

Farady hesitated.

"Yes, he is, but so are a great many other things."

He hurried through the garden and rang the bell loud and long. After some delay a glow appeared in the fanlight over the door and a voice inquired:

"*Qui est là?*"

Farady gave his name and the door was opened by Warrant's factotum who, as a modest woman, concealed her scantily covered enchantments by hiding behind it.

Farady went in and up the stairs. The house was empty. He returned to the hall in a mood of angry frustration.

“*Où est le maître?*” he demanded in good Britannic French.

“*Il se couche.*”

“No. *Il n'est pas en haut. Où est il?* Has anybody been here?”

The woman shook her head.

“*Personne du tout, personne!*” For she had been asleep.

There was nothing to be done and Farady returned to the car. He did not know whether to be angry or thankful. He took the wheel and drove to number 77.

Mr. Waring himself admitted them. He was wearing trousers and a dressing-gown, which suggested the Crimea. From contact with the pillow his head was tousled and he looked hot and bright eyed.

“I wouldn't say I wasn't a fraud in askin' you to look in, Doctor,” said he, “but I was feeling very low in meself and had a longing for company.”

Nurse Gillow, who had been standing behind Farady, came into view and the conversation simultaneously.

“You pop along to bed, ma lad, and we'll fix you oop in no time.”

At the sound of those brave, broad vowels and the

sight of the brave, broad figure which uttered them, Mr. Waring's face was illumined by wonderment and delight.

"If this doesn't beat all," he cried, "and not five minutes ago I was sayin' to meself that I should never 'ear good Yorkshire spoke again. Not that I've anything to justify 'avin' a nurse, but for the pleasure of 'earin' that voice of yours, blest if I wouldn't keep you 'ere with no more the matter wi' me than a splinter in finger."

Nurse Gillow drove him ahead of her as though he were a gaggle of geese.

"Not so mooch of the clack-clack," she ordered. "Get along to where Doctor can 'ave a look at you, and you can tell me all about Huddersfield while I give you a sponge down."

Mr. Waring proved a most docile patient, but although he replied simply and directly to Farady's questions and submitted himself to one of "these new-fangled" injections, his real attention was absorbed by Nurse Gillow. There was about her, from his point of view, something essentially proper and womanly. Her face had that wide-open, homely, "come-along-and-be-damned" look; nor were her attractions the less apparent when she turned about. There was plenty of beam to her—plenty to sit on—something that a man, and not in any vulgar sense, might take a pride in smacking. Her mere presence banished, as by magic, the melancholy and loneliness that he had suffered since his wife was taken from him. It filled

the little world before him with the spacious promise of comradeship.

Farady sensed at once that in bringing these two together he had forged a powerful weapon to fight disease. It was a gross injustice of fate to visit upon such a harmless and well-meaning individual so cruel a sickness. The savage indignation Farady felt for Warrant reflected itself on his face.

"If looks mean anything ye're not over-pleased with me, Doctor," said Mr. Waring.

Farady pulled himself together with a jerk.

"Don't you believe it. There's nothing much wrong with you. Just a bit of local inflammation."

He held a light to the patient's eyes and was relieved to observe that there was no dilation of the pupils. But the fine scratches on the tongue were very evident and the throat was inflamed. He turned from the bed and beckoned Nurse Gillow to follow.

In the little hall he stood nibbling a finger-nail and staring at the telephone attached to the wall. Rather anxiously she inquired:

"He's going to be all right, isn't he?"

"He's got to be."

His violence startled her.

"It isn't often I take to a patient as I have to him. Most of my cases down 'ere spring from folks losin' more than they bargain for at tables and not havin' the nervous system to stand the strain."

But Farady did not appear to be listening. He said:

"You're a sensible sort. What's the right thing to do, help the living or avenge the dead?"

Her eyebrows arched.

"Nobbut a fool would ask such a question as that," she replied promptly.

But Farady was unconvinced.

"Ah, but it's a matter of principle. Being in love doesn't excuse a man for throwing his principles overboard. Or does it? Is the woman he loves going to think the better of him for doing that, even though it's to her advantage that he should? Is she? Is she?"

Nurse Gillow replied:

"I came 'ere to do a job of work and not to have a lot of loose talk about love and such."

Farady shifted his gaze from the telephone to the honest indignation in the woman's eyes.

"And that should go for me, too," said he, and began furiously to outline their conduct of the case.

## 7.

At the western extremity of the *plage*, in a place deserted save for one or two stationary cars in which lovers huddled, Rentyen switched off the headlights and the engine and brought his car to a standstill. It is possible that he might have found an even more lonely spot, but in the event of Warrant becoming violent there was comfort in the knowledge that one or two couples were at hand who might be persuaded,

at the summons of a shout, to abandon petting in favour of more vigorous exercise.

Warrant, who had been drowsing and mumbling to himself during the journey, lifted his head and looked at the surrounding desolation with frowning confusion.

“Whassy idea?” he asked.

Rentyen filled his lungs and answered with a razor-edged inflexion:

“Paul Ascherer is dead.”

Warrant received the news without emotion.

“So what?”

“Who killed him?”

Warrant said:

“Is it a riddle?”

“WHO KILLED HIM?”

Warrant said:

“How should I know? I’m only sorry he’s dead—so soon.”

“So soon?”

“S’always a pity when a man like that dies—too soon.”

For the third time Rentyen repeated:

“Who killed him?”

Warrant made a mazy gesture.

“Aren’chu being rather a bore? ‘Who killed him—who killed him?’ I said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow.”

It was a perfect cue and Napier Rentyen threw his grenade.

"Not with your bow and arrow, Warrant; with a poisoned envelope."

He felt the man beside him stiffen. The head slugged round and the blind-looking eyes peered into his. Rentyen half-drew the envelope from his breast-pocket.

"Look, you murderer. Look, I have it here. See, your own writing—your own sketches and the flap of the envelope smeared with the blasted stuff."

"No," said Warrant, dully. "It was burnt—burnt."

"So you believed, but your daughter was there. She rescued it from the fire—your daughter. Rather ironical, Warrant, that your perfect crime should be spoilt by your own daughter."

The breath sighed through Warrant's shut teeth and his body went limp. Then, with a world of sadness, he said:

"That could never be. I have no daughter."

Rentyen said:

"Better face up to it. Our next port of call is the police station. Why did you kill him?"

The voice that answered sounded very weary.

"Because I have no daughter."

Rentyen started the engine with dramatic suddenness.

"Wait," said Warrant. "It would be uncivil not to hear my reason."

Rentyen switched off and folded his arms.

"Well?"

It was not easy with a fuddled brain to tell the tale. Words and memories eluded Warrant. He seemed to

be tacking into the eye of a wind and made no headway. There was a blur of references to traitors—treachery—the war—men who stayed at home. Bitter, foggy stuff, unconnected by a single thread, until, and seemingly for no apparent reason, the name Laura was spoken.

“Unlike any other woman—elusive—infinitely elusive. You could see emotions travel over her face like cloud shadows on the hills. She was still water that trembled at a touch. The beauty of that companionship—the exquisite beauty. And she was all mine. I was so much more happy than a god.” He stopped and shivered. “This is a cold, unfriendly place. Let’s get a drink?” But Rentyen neither spoke nor stirred and he forced his mind back to the narrative.

And now it was running more smoothly along the trenches of the western front when “separation was almost a perfect thing that built up and strengthened” his adoration of her.

“Grey months of war made beautiful by looking forward. The battle of Loos and myself unaware of it because of some li’l nonsense she had written.” One of his hands fell and fastened upon Rentyen’s knee. “Women have powers to exalt men’s spirits above the stars—or bury them in the clinkers of hell. Where was I when the wire came that told me there was a flower in our garden? Some place where the grass was trampled into mud. A flower—Richenda—Richenda.” His brain cleared and he began to speak rapidly, colloquially, with poetry of phrase sloughed in a breath.

"I asked for leave, but the swine refused me. I tried to get wounded so as to get home if only for an hour or two. No use. 'Get back'—'Get on with the bloody war.' Then, when leave was in sight, they transferred us to Salonika. For the duration."

Richenda was nearly three years old when first he saw her. In her mother's eyes no "fairy candles burnt" to welcome him. The fires of her love had been drawn. When he stooped to kiss the child she had gathered her up with: "It's too soon. You'll frighten her." And when he held out his arms to Laura it was only her cheek she gave him. He never touched her lips again. She said: "I'm sorry. The war makes one feel differently. I can't—I won't be taken for granted."

It was the cold lairs to which he had returned.

"The ice had packed up all round us, and she never told me why. Some natures demand the sun. Mine was like that. Oh, those slow, blood-freezing years! Duty served on ice. Civility on ice. An iced bed if I cared to claim a share in it. Five years of slow ice-poisoning, and it did not kill my love for her. But it killed the rest of me. I could have been greater than the greatest. I could have built churches and high towers. And where are they? Drowned at the bottom of a glass. Meet genius, Rentyen, disguised as a drunken loafer. Meet an example of what a woman's politeness can make of a man."

When he started to drink she ceased to be polite. They fought about Richenda. She claiming her. He

claiming an equal share. She declaring that he was unfit to be in the same house with a child.

“Even that solace was denied me. An outcast—a pariah in my own home. We were fighting on the day she died. Her heart stopped beating with some bitter thing half said. It was cold and misty when I buried her and looking into the grave I saw that a sheet of frost had gathered on her coffin boards.”

That night Warrant sat in the empty house with Laura’s deed-box open before him. She had kept many of his early letters and he read and burned them one by one. Also he burned a thing of twisted wires and dried petals which once had been a bridal bouquet. At the bottom of the box he found a single sheet of note-paper with a few typed lines upon it.

Warrant took a wallet from his pocket and produced a letter.

“This,” he said and gave it to Rentyen to read by the light of a dashboard lamp.

The date was the 16th of June 1915, but there was no address.

“DEAREST, DEAREST LAURA,

You could not be happier than I am. I do not believe a mother’s feelings are stronger than a father’s when a child is born.

I suppose it is best we should not meet until you leave the nursing home, but never have I so greatly longed to take you in my arms.

My love for and pride in you.

COALY.”

Even the signature was in type, for the writer took no risks.

Rentyen returned the letter with a nod of pity.

“I can imagine what you suffered.”

“Signed Coaly,” said Warrant. “A nice warm, friendly name.”

“You knew the man?”

Warrant shook his head.

“Not then. It was her way to have a private name for those she loved. I had one once.”

Rentyen turned suddenly.

“Good God! D’you mean it was Paul?”

“Who else? As an actor you would have admired how the secret was disclosed. A fortnight ago Richenda came back from America where I sent her after her mother died. In the last few months I had pulled myself together and accepted this commission for *Paradis sur Mer*. Paul Ascherer was with me when Richenda arrived. It was as if her mother had come into the room. I was too dazed to say much. I could only stare at her and remember. Then Paul began to talk, I’ve no notion about what. I was grateful for being left with my thoughts. Before leaving he came to me and said: ‘You must let Richenda stay a few days with us?’ I mumbled something, it doesn’t matter what, and he turned with both hands to her. ‘You will come, will you not? I am a great friend of Clive’s, and was of your mother. Perhaps I might persuade you to use the name she had for me—Coaly.’ Their backs were towards me as

he said it. They were going from the room together. Then I locked myself in and began to think and to plan. That's all. Start the car, Rentyen. Mustn't keep the police up all night."

But Rentyen did not move. Murder was vile as at the best it is, yet, in a sense, he could understand. So much in the must-be-loved artist soul of Warrant that was reflected in his own. The best and noblest in Warrant had been poisoned. His love and life and hopes had all been shattered. Was it so unforgivable that he had struck back, giving poison for poison?

Rentyen clicked a tongue against the dry roof of his mouth and forced himself to ask:

"How was it done?"

Warrant dropped his voice and talked as one artist discussing with another a fine and delicate point of technique. He spoke of the powdered glass he had used to scratch the victim's tongue as he licked the envelope. He described how he had cultivated the virus and how he had mixed with the culture a powerful narcotic.

"It was a clever idea, Rentyen, and I was proud of it. He was to sleep while the germs in him spread and multiplied. There was enough death on the gum of that envelope to kill a dozen men. It was genius, Rentyen, stark genius. I had devised a perfect murder, where the only evidence was returned by the victim through the post to the man who had done him to death."

Rentyen covered his ears.

“It’s horrible—horrible.”

Warrant’s laugh sounded like bubbles bursting on the green surface of a stagnant pond.

“No, not horrible, but merciful—much too merciful. My whole life has been spoiled. His is only ended.”

Rentyen said:

“Stop, I want to think.”

Warrant had stated a case with which he, as a man who reasoned with his emotions, could not fail to sympathise. With his own demand for love, affection, popularity and success he could imagine himself capable of any violence against a man who robbed him of their enjoyment. In imagination he saw himself in Warrant’s place, a failure and an outcast, and he knew that he would never have been man enough to blame himself for his condition. Even at the theatre when one of his productions failed to find favour he would always account for the fact by the negligence of some person other than himself. Who was he, then, to judge a man like Warrant? Without Warrant’s confession there was not a shred of evidence on which to hang him. The damning evidence of the letter had been destroyed by fire.

Napier Rentyen came to a sudden resolution.

“Warrant, why not make a bolt for it.”

“That suggestion comes too late.”

“No. Unless somebody else is implicated I won’t breathe a word.”

Warrant's head went wearily from side to side.

"Where could I go?"

Rentyen began furiously to improvise.

"There's a fellar here in the bay with seaplanes. Charter one to take you to the African coast. There must be places over there where you could lie low—Kasbahs—places like that. For all we know not another question may be asked. Give yourself a chance."

Something of Rentyen's enthusiasm communicated itself to the sleepy cells of Warrant's brain. The flight through the air—new countries—a new life. It might be worth trying . . . if he could have a drink.

"Well, what do you say?"

Warrant rumbled mumblyingly:

"Better than waiting for it. Better than that. This fellow with the planes—he lives—I know where."

"Then see him now. It isn't too late. Have you any money?"

"At my villa. Twenty thousand francs. And a passport. Under the lining paper—dressing-table drawer."

"I'll get it and pack some things for you to take. Better sleep at a hotel tonight and start first thing."

"First thing," Warrant repeated.

"Come on: Let's go!"

The car made a "U" turn and speeded along the *plage*. Near the harbour end of the town Warrant pointed at a house.

"He lives there."

"Right." Rentyen pulled up. "Give me the key of your villa. Right. Where shall I pick you up?"

Warrant nodded towards the lights of a café.

"Right. But only one drink, if that."

"Right," said Warrant.

He was sitting at a sidewalk table with three empty glasses before him when Rentyen returned with a suit-case, a passport and the money. He did not stop the car before the café, but slowed down and lured Warrant to follow him to a quiet corner. He said:

"I got in and out without being heard. Here's your gear and the cash. How about the plane?"

"All fixed up. Leave nine-thirty in morning."

"Better give a bogus name at the hotel."

"Right."

Rentyen hesitated. Most earnestly he wanted to avoid shaking hands.

"Then that's about all we can do. Good luck."

In spite of his unwillingness he offered a hand.

Warrant picked up the suit-case and shook his head.

"Sorry, hand's full," he said, understandingly.

Rentyen watched him blunder round the corner, ricochet off a lamp-post and disappear from view.

Before putting the car into gear Rentyen raised the wind-screen so that the night air should rush past his ears. Never had he felt such need of a roaring wind to clear his brain. The scream of the engine rose higher and higher as he increased speed. And mile

after mile lines from *Hamlet* were pouring from the exhaust: "If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck—if he by chance escape your venom'd stuck."

Above the din Rentyen cried aloud:

"I'll never lick another postage stamp as long as I live."

## 8.

Carrying the suit-case in one hand and a bundle of thousand-franc notes in the other, Clive Warrant entered the lobby of the Hotel de Laghouat and demanded a room. It was typical of the unbalanced state of his mind that he should have chosen a hotel at which he was a familiar figure. The reception clerk to whom he addressed himself wished him a good evening in his own name, but Warrant was unconscious of that. He asked for a room and added that his name was Preston. The clerk, regarding this as a pleasantry, allotted him number 440 on the fourth floor and presented the key to a courier. Picking up a handful of leaflets advertising excursions to Grasse and the Col de Braus, and leaving his pile of notes on the desk, Warrant made an uncertain passage towards the elevator. He was overtaken by the clerk, who returned the notes and recovered the leaflets.

"Had some trouble with my eyes," Warrant explained.

Number 440 was a suite comprising a little *salon*, a bed, dressing and bathroom and a great many

cupboards. To an inquiry as to whether it was to his liking he replied:

“Bring bottle of brandy.”

The waiter regretted that under a rule of the management drinks were served singly in guests’ rooms.

Warrant received this news with a shrug.

“It simply means somebody running up and down stairs all night.”

He sat on the bed and stared with æsthetic distaste at the decorations and appointments of the room. By a trick of vision they came into and went out of focus. Asked if he wanted anything else he replied:

“To be left alone. And see that I am called with a brandy and soda at eight-thirty tomorrow morning.”

“Then Monsieur does not wish for the drink he has now ordered?”

“God, yes—and cig’rettes, Chesterfields. Better bring a bo’l of brandy.”

“But, Monsieur . . .”

“Don’ le’s go over all that again.”

The members of the staff retired. Outside the door they exchanged grimaces.

Warrant loosened the knot of his tie, kicked off his shoes, and flopped on the pillows. His brain began to wheel and whirl. Memory of recent events receded and was lost. He filled his lungs and emptied them, puffily. He tried to remember if he had ordered a drink and decided that he had omitted to do so. A bell-push hung by a wire over the bed. He made a dab at it and missed. He dabbed again and missed

again. He decided that it was a moving mark—or perhaps a pendulum of some sort. In either case he would waste no more time with it. Then he remembered that he had ordered a drink and was comforted. In a little while the waiter would bring it. The waiter would come in through one of the many doors with which the room was surrounded. But which door? That one, or that, or that?

The spinning top inside his head wobbled, heeled over and came to rest. Warrant sat up and felt for his watch. It was important that he should not be late for the plane. He must leave the hotel at latest by nine-fifteen. He stared at the watch. The hands were gone. No they weren't. They stood at midnight. So there was plenty of time.

While he was looking at his watch the waiter came in with the drink and cigarettes and went out again.

Warrant thought: "Don't know which door he came in by even now."

As he reached for the glass he nearly capsized it. To be on the safe side, he drank its contents in a single draught. His usual practice was to sip-sip-sip and the neat spirits swallowed in bulk ran through him like fire through a patch of gorse. They uplifted him. They induced a rapturous delusion of grandeur. For the next few moments he was a superman. He strutted up and down, swelling his chest like a pigeon and declaiming:

"You thought I didn't count, Paul. Greatest mistake you ever made. No man makes a cuckold

of me. The crime of the century and nobody knows how it was done. Not one living soul!"

He had forgotten Rentyen; forgotten everything but pride.

In this fine new mood it was easy to reach the bell-push and press it. He had paced through to the *salon* when the waiter appeared in the bedroom.

"The same again," he ordered loudly. "Better bring a bo'l." Once more the waiter vanished through one of those mystery doors.

"Jus' listen me," said Warrant, addressing the departed waiter and his image in a mirror at the same time. "If you'd brought off some'ing superl'ively clever would you hide it under a bushel?" There was no reply, because there was nobody to reply. Warrant took silence for an emphatic negative. "No, I should say not. An' neither will I. Then give me some paper—pen an' paper."

The waiter came back into the room as Warrant came back from the *salon*. He frowned heavily at the tray.

"Where is it?"

The waiter indicated the glass.

"*Voilà, M'sieur.*"

"No, no. The paper. I asked for pap'an'pen."

The waiter made a gracious gesture towards the writing-table as though it was the most natural thing in the world that Monsieur had failed to notice its presence. Warrant followed the direction of the gesture and nodded with grave condescension. He

was approaching the table as the waiter went out, so the mystery of the doors was unrevealed.

"Not that it matters," said he, and sat down to write.

The document which was to prove to the world that no man could make a cuckold of Clive Warrant, started with a flourish:

"I, Clive Warrant, hereby declare my sole and absolute responsibility for the death of Paul Ascherer."

The rest did not come so easily and, while racking his brain for a progressive line of thought, he did a drawing on the margin of two children digging a castle in the sand. A stroke of the pen suggested the tide running in, eager to swamp and envelop it. They were charming little children and, presently, he began to talk to them.

"Your father may not be the man you think. Happiness is a synonym for ignorance."

He rose and went to the other table for his drink. On the way his memory came face to face with Rentyen. He stopped—startled—dismayed. For Rentyen knew. Rentyen had been told. The need to make this declaration did not exist. The world would learn of his perfect crime through Rentyen. Then came disturbing doubts. Would Rentyen tell? Had Rentyen cunningly persuaded him to make a confession so that he himself could take the credit of killing Ascherer. What was more likely than that the pretence

of friendship and understanding Rentyen had shown was a mask for treachery; a fresh attempt to steal from him the tribute that his cunning and cleverness deserved?

He smote his hands together in an agony of rage and confusion. In all the world who could be trusted? Aloud he cried:

“I was born to be great and they have conspired against me.”

He drank his brandy and lurched back to the table. It was hard now to see the paper, but his pen flew over page after page. He wrote by touch—caring nothing for phrase or syntax—a torrent of words and disconnected thoughts, bereft of stops or capitals. Whatever his brain held went down upon the page. Bitterness and hatred and despair, swollen passages of pride; and words as simple and as touching as tears.

Perhaps the strangest part of this amazing document was that which dealt with the means he had employed to kill his enemy. For under the guise of a scientific treatise was set forth as crazy a procession of inaccuracies as ever were mustered together. An entire page was scrawled over with figures and formulas, microscopic counts and details of procedure. In violent contrast to this pretentious nonsense was a thumb-nail sketch of himself pounding up the glass of an electric-light bulb in a pestle and mortar.

In the composition of the last paragraph his brain showed evidence of having cleared. It ran:

"At the precise moment that you are reading this I shall leave the hotel and depart by air to a destination unknown. The whole thing planned to a second. Spring to your telephones! Call up the police! Unleash the dogs of justice! You ARE TOO LATE.

CLIVE WARRANT."

At the bottom of the page was a fine line sketch of a plane, small and high over a far horizon.

A clock was striking three when he crammed the pages into the largest envelope he could find and ran the tip of his tongue along the gummed flap. The edge of the paper was rough and felt sharp against his tongue, and after licking it he recoiled and sat awhile shivering, and with teeth that chattered. Also he mumbled:

"What a horrible way to die."

He controlled himself sufficiently to address the envelope with certain instructions to Dr. Farady, La Peruse, Rocquebrune.

"The one honest man of the whole boiling lot," he said and banged the letter down on the blotter.

It took him nearly five minutes to locate the bell-push, and having done so he pressed it until the waiter came.

The waiter's "M'sieur?" was almost reproachful. To save himself a journey he had brought more brandy.

"Now lissen 'tentively' "Warrant commanded. "A

messenger mus' deliver this letter to place and person addressed at nine-fifteen t'morrow morn. In other words at precise moment I leave this 'otel. Mos' important make no mistake about that. Too soon'd be disasrous. Too late'd spoil excitement of giving them the slip with on'y a minute or so to spare. Yousee—brains like mine work with th' accuracy of chronometer. Genius 's'always unpredictable."

*"Oui, Monsieur."*

"Let you into secret. By nine-thirty more people'll want me than anybody in the world. But they'll be dis'pointed. I shall be gone—ut-ly. BZZzzzzzzz-monggggggnnn!" And he concluded with a tolerable imitation of an aero engine.

The waiter bowed.

"To Mister Faradie at nine-fifteen is ze lettaire delivered."

"Good. Money somewhere ov'there. Help'self."

The waiter helped himself liberally, allowing a margin for sleep lost, and went out.

"Ah!" cried Warrant, triumphantly, for the mystery of the door was revealed at last. He rolled towards it, turned the key in the lock and tossed it on to the glass surface of the dressing-table over which it glided and fell unnoticed in the corner beyond.

The town clocks chimed the half dismally. Clive Warrant gulped down the brandy and sprawled across the bed with his face buried in the pillows. Thick and mumbled came the words:

"Why mus' you hurt me so, Laura? who never

hurt a living soul? Laura, answer me! Do you want to freeze my soul . . . in ice the very . . ." The words dwined to a sigh—a sob—and snores—the heavy snoring of a drunken sleep.

## 9.

While Rentyen's car was standing before Warrant's villa and Rentyen himself was inside collecting the money, the passport and the clothes that Warrant was to take with him on his flight from France, the canvas sheeting over the back seat was lifted at one corner and a girl's head looked cautiously to right and left.

Satisfied that the street was empty Richenda crawled from her hiding-place and flitted to the protecting shadows of a garden opposite.

Her intention when she had stowed herself away in Rentyen's car had been either to try and obtain and destroy the evidence against Warrant, or to frustrate Rentyen's project to hand him over to the police. She had no clear idea how these feats would be accomplished, although, on the outward journey, and in the misery of mind from which she was suffering, she flirted with the idea of making a grab at the wheel and deliberately wrecking the car. This project she had abandoned, for, by no stretch of imagination could it be called fair play. Rentyen after all had only set out to do what she herself was doing—protect somebody. She could not expose him to the risk of death for no better reason than that she cared little

enough what happened to herself. There had come to her the shuddering realisation that one murderer in the family was enough.

So Richenda lay low beneath the sheeting at the back of the car and left Fate to decide what course she must pursue. And Fate appointed Rentyen as its sentimental instrument.

She knew that she would never have wrung from Warrant so full a confession. It needed a man—a fellow spirit and an artist to have done that. The antipathy which Warrant had always revealed for her would have acted upon him as a gag. She would never have succeeded in serving Warrant as well or as generously as Rentyen had done. Not that she had any real faith in the likelihood of his escape. If his crime came to light she had no doubt that the police would find him wherever he might be.

When Warrant had been dropped at the house of the man who rented the seaplanes, her first impulse had been to disclose her presence to Rentyen, if only to express gratitude for what he had done. But reflection warned her that she would be doing him a better service in leaving the car without letting him know, then or ever, that she had been a silent witness of all that had happened between Warrant and himself. She knew enough of the law to be aware that Rentyen had been guilty of an act that might involve him in a charge of complicity. His position would not be improved if it was known that she might be subpoenaed to give evidence against him.

So Richenda remained hidden, first beneath the sheeting and later among some myrtles in the garden facing Warrant's villa. In a little while she saw Rentyen come from the house, silently close the door and tiptoe through the garden to his car. She saw him heave a suit-case on to the front seat and drive away.

She felt very grateful to him, and very touched by the sympathy he had revealed. Almost with shame she admitted that his sympathy had been much more real and practical than hers. But in her own defence she realised that he was an outsider looking in, and she was an insider looking out. Which made a vast difference.

From the moment when Farady first voiced his suspicions that Warrant was guilty of the murder she had felt unclean and tainted. All that was honest and forthright in her nature recoiled from the idea that there coursed through her veins the blood of a drunkard and a homicide. That awful knowledge had made it possible for her to listen to the earlier part of Warrant's confession with feelings of disgust and resentment. She had been unable to find pity in her heart for a man who by his own admission, and every inflexion, had proved himself to be saturated in self-pity. The pictorial phrases he had used—his *cri de cœur*—his twists and turns of coloured speech made no appeal to her emotions. She was of a generation who regarded that manner of talk as a mere façade—a token and a flourish of insincerity.

It was not until he reached the part of his narrative where she learned that she was the daughter of another man, that real pity for him stirred in her; and that was a pity that may have found its inspiration in relief.

Under a compulsion of loyalty she had set forth that night to offer to a man for whom she had no affection a chance to escape. She knew that she had no choice but to do so, because that man was her father. But when she learnt from his own lips that he was not her father, and that the compulsion of loyalty did not therefore exist, her desire to give him a chance was far greater and more urgent than it had been before.

Warrant's confession had washed her clean—or nearly.

She understood now the queer possessiveness that Paul Ascherer had adopted towards her. She understood, too, why she had never quite resented it. Yet she did not reproach herself for offering him so little warmth or friendliness. That he had been a traitor to her mother as well as to Warrant had been clearly shown. In her own life he had not contributed one useful or constructive service. Their meeting had been pure chance. Ascherer had done nothing to promote it. They had met and, perhaps because she was like her mother, or perhaps because he was an opportunist, or perhaps, and most likely of all, because he had no child of his own born in wedlock, he had conceived the idea that she should decorate his life and establishment. She did not doubt that the pro-

posal to adopt her had been made in his own interests rather than in hers. Unloved, unlovable and ageing, he sought to corner her affections with a show of tenderness and sentiment and an offer of benefits that should be hers by way of repayment. If he had had the courage to tell her the truth, to admit and acknowledge her, she would have liked him so much better. But he had lacked that courage, and dead or alive he offered little to the imagination to pity or regret.

Richenda lifted her thoughts from the loneliness in her heart, and her eyes to the vast and greater loneliness of the night. She was nobody's child. She belonged nowhere. If this dreadful business could be effaced and forgotten, free of all ties and responsibilities, a fresh start might be made. But could it be effaced? Was not a fresh angle of the tragedy being played at number 77 of the street in which she stood. There was a bare chance that Warrant would get safely away. There was an even barer chance that the verdict at the inquest would be "Death from natural causes." But if Waring died there could be no question of concealment. Every ugly detail would be published throughout the world.

As Richenda walked slowly up the street she shut her hands and prayed.

The door was opened by Farady. Doubts and anxiety had lined and greyed his face. Not once during the night had he been able to detach his mind from thoughts of Richenda. In imagination he had

seen her planning Warrant's escape and in so doing making herself an accessory after the fact. He had no doubt that the worst possible thing that Warrant could do would be to attempt to leave France. Such an action would inevitably arouse the suspicion of the police, even if no evidence was forthcoming at the inquest to prove that murder had been done. He had hardly dared to ask himself what his evidence was going to be. Because of his love for Richenda he believed that he would say nothing. But if Waring were to die silence would be impossible. The truth would have to be told. A dozen times during the night he had cursed himself for a criminal lack of vision in reconstructing in Richenda's presence how the crime had been committed. That was a folly, a clumsiness and a brutality that could never be forgiven. For her implication in the affair nobody but himself was to blame. Of all people in the world she was the last to whom he should have confided. It was useless to tell himself that he had been startled into speaking his thoughts aloud, for he knew, now, that he had been guilty of intellectual conceit, a desire to prove himself more astute than Ascherer, the police and the other doctors all put together. There was no limit to the disasters that might follow as a consequence of that conceit. He had, in effect, challenged the girl he loved into lining up alongside a murderer—and the challenge had been accepted.

The sight of her figure on the doorstep brought him no comfort. The wave of anger and intolerance and

self-resentment that swept over him robbed him of the power to speak.

Richenda herself could only ask with difficulty: "How is he?"

"Waring? It's too early to say. I was going to take his temperature when I heard the bell." He took a step towards her. "I suppose you telephoned to Warrant. He was gone when I arrived at Nice."

"No, I didn't telephone. I did nothing."

He would have given all he possessed to believe her. His head went wearily from side to side.

"I've no right to ask questions. But for me you would never have known. You are his daughter. You had to give him a chance. But, oh my dear, don't you see what mixing yourself up with him may mean?"

"Then you have told the police?"

Farady shut his hands.

"No." It was a confession of love and weakness in a single word. "Yet if anybody ever deserved to suffer . . ."

"I think he has suffered enough," said Richenda.

Farady jerked his head towards the hall behind him.

"And poor devils like Waring must pay for his sufferings, I suppose?"

Richenda said:

"I think you should have told the police. Why didn't you?"

"You should know."

"I wouldn't have you betray your own beliefs for

my sake. After what's happened, it's all over with us."

He gripped her by the shoulders.

"Stop talking like that. Isn't there enough that's ugly and damnable in this business without robbing it of the one thing that is worth while. I love you, and because I love you, ideals and all the rest must go overboard."

Richenda said:

"That's not a happy start for loving anybody, Miles. And I'm not a good stock to be loved."

"Oh, to hell with backgrounds," he cried. "It's yourself I love. And if there's any kindness in your heart, don't talk about ending things but beginning 'em. Love me in return, for God knows I'm hating myself enough to need it."

Richenda was tired, so tired that she longed for a pair of strong arms to creep into. A stray moonbeam found and made a ghost of her—a ghost with no place to go.

"I do love you, Miles," she said, "I do, but it's all such a muddle."

He took a step towards her, but Nurse Gillow came hurrying down the passage.

"There's no rise in temperature," she said. "He's no worse."

Richenda cried out:

"He will get well, won't he?"

Nurse Gillow was too wise in her craft to be honest to anybody who asked questions in that tone of voice. She put out a hand and patted Richenda's cheek.

"Why, it's just a lot of fuss about nothing. He's scratched his tongue a bit; as likely as not from eatin' cheese off point of his knife. Men get into shockin' 'abits when they've no woman to look after 'em. I've tucked 'im oop an' he's sleepin' like a babe. The best you can do is to get some sleep yerselves. No sense in the 'ole of creation sitting oop all night."

But in spite of her advice they did sit up, and the rose dust of dawn had turned to gold on the mountain tops when Farady, with Richenda beside him, took the road to Rocquebrune.

## 10.

Napier Rentyen delivered himself at La Peruse with the milk and the morning papers. The hangover of excitement following his interview with Warrant had banished all thoughts of sleep. It had, moreover, occurred to him that as an accomplice in Warrant's escape it was advisable to establish an alibi. To this end he visited the Casino, The Sporting Club and other places where games of chance were practised until sun-up and after. What he would like to have done would have been to return and recount to Venice the astonishing events of the evening. He decided, reluctantly, that it would be neither fair nor prudent to do so. Even with himself as the narrator, the story was not one that was likely to contribute to her peace of mind. It was a great pity this should be so, for he had no doubt that he would have put it over in a

highly dramatic form. All too seldom had it fallen to his lot to play a part in a drama of real life which possessed features and excitements more usually associated with fiction. With a sense of being cheated of an exceptional opportunity, he sought what excitement was to be found in roulette and the wooden shoe of *Chemin de Fer*.

The early sunlight and the sound of his car coming to rest in the courtyard percolated through the windows of Venice's room and brought her out of bed.

In a wrap of fine wool and frothy swansdown she descended the stairs and met him in the hall.

Rentyen was humming a chansonnette which he favoured in moods of self-congratulation. He gave her an airy wave of the hand and a smile divorced from any semblance of care. He said:

“When Venice enters a room the sun comes out.”

But Venice's sun was behind a cloud of many misgivings.

“Banish that look of anxiety,” he beseeched. “Thanks to this and thanks to that, everything is going to be all right.”

She knew by the phrase and by his manner that he had been up to something which he proposed, if able, to keep secret. She also guessed that it would not be long before he told her all about it.

“Then they have set him free?” she asked.

His forehead went into lines of puzzlement.

“They? Who? Don't know what you mean.”

"The police. Colonel Culver. They took him away late last night."

"Well, if that isn't the funniest thing!" cried Rentyen, gaily, and stopped abruptly. "No, it isn't, though. It's terribly unfunny. What was the idea?"

"Scotland Yard rang them up to say that Lloyds wanted investigations made into Paul's death. A policy for twenty-five thousand pounds was taken out on his life by Colonel Culver. Faun, you don't believe that he . . ."

Rentyen waved her down.

"No, no. Of course not. The man's a swine, but not that kind of swine. Besides, I know who did it."

It was impossible for Rentyen to keep a secret.

Venice's eyes opened wide.

"You know? Then you must go at once to the police."

"That's not so easy," he cut in. "Of all damned things to happen!"

Venice said:

"It doesn't matter if it's easy or not. You know the truth and you've got to tell it."

Rentyen looked at his watch. The time was eight fifty-five.

"It can't be done. At least not yet. It wouldn't be fair."

"Fair?" she repeated. "Faun, my husband was murdered. We may not have loved each other but I owe him some justice."

"You owe him nothing. It won't harm Culver to

cool his heels for another hour. In another hour I'll—think about it."

"Then I shall call the police myself," she said. Rentyen took her by the arm.

"Please trust me to handle this, Venice. I give you my word you'll do more harm than good. With a little tact—a little arranging, there's no reason on earth why . . ."

Venice said:

"This isn't a play, Faun. It's real life and death. We can't arrange the facts to make a happy ending." And releasing herself from his grasp she moved to the telephone.

Rentyen did not try to prevent her. He said:

"I had meant never to tell this to a soul. But you compel me. A few days ago Clive Warrant discovered that Richenda was Paul's daughter, and that's why certain things have happened."

"Faun!"

"I know. It's an ugly story—and a very ugly revenge, but when a man's whole life has been wrecked, isn't it possible to temper justice with mercy?"

Venice dropped into a chair and pressed her fingers to her eyes.

"I don't know what we ought to do."

"What we ought to do is clear enough. We ought to inform the police, but in less than an hour Warrant will have left France. There is still time, if you wish it, to dig him out of his earth and throw him to the dogs. But can one wish that? Paul Ascherer is

dead, and Clive Warrant's head in a basket under the knife of Madame Guillotine won't bring him to life again."

It was all very real and poignant, yet as he finished speaking, Rentyen could not divorce from his mind the thought of an audience sitting spellbound and of their roar of applause as the curtain fell on the final speech.

Venice subscribed just one line too many.

"Very well, Faun, in an hour, then."

### III.

At a hairpin bend in the road before the driveway to La Peruse, two motor cars narrowly avoided a collision. In one was a chauffeur whose peaked cap bore the name Hotel de Laghouat. In the other was Frenant, *Préfet de Police*, and the very disgruntled Colonel Culver. In the resultant argument, Frenant, after declaring his office, made threats and promises of legal proceedings. It was obvious, he declared, that the driver of the other vehicle was not displaying proper regard for public safety. The chauffeur expressed deep contrition. He admitted that his attention had been occupied in trying to locate a house called La Peruse. Asked what he wanted at La Peruse, he replied that he had a letter to deliver.

"Give the letter to me."

"But Monsieur le Préfet, I was told to give it to Monsieur Farady in person at nine-fifteen precisely."

Frenant began to storm.

"Nonsense. You will give it to me or face the consequences."

The chauffeur took the line of least resistance.

"Rather than face the consequences I will give it to you."

The letter changed hands.

"And must I still receive a summons, Monsieur le Préfet?"

"That will be revealed later."

Frenant was frowning at the envelope as he re-entered his car. He had a feeling that there was something fishy about it. Why, for example, must it be delivered at nine-fifteen precisely? Why should it be scrawled over with:

"*Very Private.*" " *Urgent.*" " To be delivered in person to

Dr. Farady

La Peruse

Rocquebrune

*neither earlier nor later than 9.15 a.m."*

He thrust it beneath Culver's nose.

"Who writes thees?" he demanded.

"I neither know nor care."

"You 'ave not looked."

With a grunt of protest Culver took the envelope and scowled at it.

"It might be—I think it actually is from Clive Warrant."

Frenant twitched his nose like a rabbit.

“Does Mr. Warrant leeve at ze Hotel de Laghouat?”

“No, he does not.”

“Zen why does ’e write from zere?”

“Look here,” Culver stormed, “I’ve been answering your questions half the night and I’ll be damned if I answer another one. We shall hear what the British Consul has to say about your treatment of me.”

Frenant recovered the letter and twisted it this way and that. He said:

“From an *Écossais* I ’ear a proverb ‘Keep your breath to cool your porridge.’ Zat ees for you to do.”

“Eh?”

“So do you shut up.”

But Culver refused to shut up. All the way along the drive he was muttering fulminous opinions about “blasted Jacks in office.”

The garage clock was striking nine as they drove by. They stopped in the courtyard and Culver got out, walked towards the house and returned.

“And now, Mister Policeman, I’ll tell you something to prove what a fool you are. The story about the gipsy’s prophecy that Ascherer would die within a month was published in a dozen London newspapers. Hundreds of people took a gamble on his life. I heard that Lloyds alone have taken over three thousand pounds in premiums on the risk. Call ’em up—don’t take my word for it—call ’em up and ask for the addresses of all the policy holders. The British Government ’d be only too glad to stick ’em aboard

a warship and send 'em over here to answer your damned silly questions. And now you can go to the devil and get on with it."

"I sink," replied Frenant, becoming at once colloquial, transatlantic and offensive, "you are an old bum."

It is impossible to say into what depths of abuse these gentlemen might have descended, had not the car with Farady and Richenda aboard rolled into the courtyard. Richenda got out and went into the house and Farady was turning the car in the direction of the garage when Frenant recognised him and threw open the door of his own car so violently that Culver received a lung-emptying blow from the handle in the solar plexus. Without waiting to apologise, Frenant hastened in pursuit of Farady. He was too late to catch up the big limousine, but a moment later he met Farady walking up the drive.

In spite of breathlessness he contrived to simulate a hearty welcome which Farady made no pretence of returning. The talk ran thus:

"Ah, I am glad to meet you so soon."

Farady frowned anxiously.

"I don't know why you should be. I don't know why you are here at all, unless it is to report the result of the autopsy."

"*Hélas!* I do not know eet."

"Then can't you give us a rest?"

"Ze police nevaire rest." Then with a glance at Farady's dishevelled dinner clothes: "And you,

Monsieur, do not appear to 'ave 'ad much rest zis night."

"That is my own affair."

"Oh, *parfaitement*. Well, I 'ave heem!"

Farady stopped short.

"Have whom?"

Frenant gave a satisfied smile.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! you are veri excited—almost alarmed, huh?"

"Nothing of the kind." But Farady had given himself away and knew it.

"Zat ees good. Eet ees ze lettaire I have."

"I don't know anything about a letter."

Farant took it from his pocket and read aloud:

"Veri private. Urgent. To be delivered in person to Doctor Faradie, La Peruse, Rocquebrune, neither earlier nor lataire than nine-fifteen a.m."

Farady shook his head.

"I know nothing about that. Where did you get it?"

"From a messenger."

Farady held out a hand, but Frenant withdrew beyond his reach.

"You were not expecting zis?"

"No."

"And you do not know from whom he comes?"

"How should I? I haven't seen the writing."

"*Voilà!* No, I hold heem myself."

Farady took a step nearer.

"Kindly give it to me."

"On one condition, zat we read heem togezzer."

“I’ll see you damned.”

Frenant thrust the letter in the pocket of his jacket that was furthest from Farady. Under cover of the pocket his fingers split the envelope and opened up the pages.

“Give that to me,” Farady shouted.

“You are behaving in a veri suspicious manner, Monsieur.”

Farady thought:

“And so I am.” But his temper was up and he could not avoid showing it.

“Because I object to having my private correspondence . . .”

“Poof!” was the reply. And then an astonishing thing happened. From Frenant’s left-hand pocket came the opened letter and from his right a pistol which he pointed at Farady’s chest.

The first damning line of Warrant’s confession took no longer to read than was occupied by Farady in recovering from his amazement.

“*Nom d’un nom!*” cried the little policeman, and stuffing the pistol in his pocket he ran like a rabbit towards the house and a telephone.

## 12.

Three times the waiter knocked at the door of Warrant’s room before there was any reply.

“’Arf passe eight, Monsieur. Monsieur’s bresfex is ready.”

"Bring it in." Warrant's voice was muffled by the pillows.

Followed a rattling of the latch.

"Ze door is lock on ze inside, Monsieur."

"Leave it outside."

A glass tinkled as the tray was set down and there was the sound of retreating footsteps.

Fully dressed, Warrant lay on the bed with his face buried in the pillows. He would just snatch another few minutes' sleep. He slept and woke and slept and woke again. Dimly he heard a clock strike the hour. He stirred himself. Something very important had to be done, but he could not remember what it was. His mind was all ache and blank and throb. Half aloud he repeated:

"Blank-and-throb, and ache-and-throb, and ache-and-blank-and-ache-and-throb, and-ache-and-ache . . ."

He stopped, rolled over and sat up. An airplane! That was it! He was catching an airplane at nine-fifteen. Life and freedom depended on catching an airplane at nine-fifteen.

The room was in inky darkness. The waiter had forgotten to come in and draw back the curtains.

He threw out a hand and knocked over an electric lamp which had been burning all night beside the bed. He heard the bulb burst with a little pop. That would mean that he would have to locate the switches by the door. But which door?

He swung his feet to the floor and felt about for his

shoes, for he had a fastidious distaste for walking unshod. He only succeeded in finding one. The other had been kicked out of reach. As he stooped to put it on, the throbbing in his head was terrible.

From the street below came a toot, like the bleat of a lost lamb. It was the postman on his rounds. Toot, a letter! Toot, a letter! Warrant paused in his fumbling with the shoe-lace to wonder why the postman was so early that morning. Usually the first delivery was at nine o'clock. Was it possible the fool waiter had not called him in time? His watch had a luminous dial and he fished it from his pocket. But the luminous paint had lost its virtue and failed to pierce the darkness.

Warrant swore thickly and came to his feet. He would have to find those switches. He bumped into the wall and with hands sweeping its surface started to wander round the room. On the way he stumbled upon the other shoe, but, clownlike, kicked it ahead of him. For the next two minutes the search was divided between the shoe and switches, with no very clear effort towards the discovery of either. When, at last, he found the switches he hinged them over, all four of them, with an upward pressure of his palm. No light came.

Warrant stamped angrily. The lights had fused. He had fused the lot when he knocked over the bedside lamp. He would have to find the window and draw the curtains. For a space he stood trying to remember where the window was located. Opposite the door?

Yes. He turned his back on the switches and stepped forward boldly. *En route* he stumbled over the truant shoe a second time.

"I'll have you when I want you," he muttered.

The curtains materialised like a conjuring trick. His hands were full of curtains. The touch of the heavy fabric filled him with a sense of triumph. He gripped them and flung them apart. It was still night. His fingers touched the glass. He looked up. There were no stars. He looked down. There were no lights in the street below. There rose to his ears the busy noise of traffic, the cries of vendors, a bell, the blare of motor horns, voices and laughter; but there were no lights.

Clive Warrant stood fumbling at his eyes. He was blind.

A little distance away a clock chimed the quarter. Out in the bay, the deep blue bay he would never see again, a seaplane was waiting to take him to safety. Over at La Peruse his confession was being opened. Even now the police might be descending on him. Police—trial—conviction—death! Then panic seized him.

There was only one thought in Clive Warrant's head. To escape from that room—from the hotel—to run blindly through the streets. Somebody would help him to find the plane!

He ran this way and that, gasping, whimpering, colliding with and upsetting the furniture, throwing open the doors of cupboards only to dash his head

against the walls beyond; stumbling into and out of the bathroom, the *salon*, more cupboards, and frustrated at every turn.

“I must find a way to freedom!” he cried.

A dozen policemen pushed breathlessly into the lobby of the hotel.

“The room of Clive Warrant at once. Four-forty. Good. Two of you watch the staircase. The rest with me.”

They crammed into the elevator as tightly as figs in a box. As they reached the fourth floor, and the iron gates clashed open, they heard a man crying triumphantly:

“Got you at last!”

Clive Warrant’s fingers were on the handle of the door. He flung it back on its hinges and stepped out boldly. A wind from the mountains smote him in the face. The low rail of the balcony could not check his flight to freedom. The sensation of falling was glorious, glorious—but too short. And then—no more.

“*Bon Dieu!*” said a white-faced man on the pavement below, “had I been one more foot to the left!”

The woman to whom he spoke made no reply. Her teeth were chattering like castanets.

The balcony on the fourth floor was thronged with policemen looking down.

## PART IV

### I.

MONSIEUR LE MARQUIS DE RENANCEAU ET DE LA TOUR BASANE presided at a conference consisting of Venice, Colonel Culver and Napier Rentyen. His conduct was a pattern of discretion and human understanding. He pointed out, rather gratuitously, that all present had passed through a period of great emotional distress and (with a shrug) not unnatural apprehension. He argued that to persons of fineness, nothing was more distasteful than to have their private affairs exhibited in public.

“Messieurs et Madame, I do not exaggerate when I say that each one of us has had wrung from himself or herself a secret which he or she would greatly prefer to have—er discreetly guarded.” He united his hands and his manner warmed. “Here, then, my friends, is the situation: Our beloved Paul Ascherer is dead; so, also, is the man who has taken his life. Under Providence an act of supreme justice has been performed.”

“To whom?” asked Rentyen, but Culver frowned him down, and the Marquis went on:

“Apart from the confession of Warrant, there is no evidence to prove that a murder was committed. *Le*

*pauvre* Paul is dead of the blood-poisoning, which is a natural death. Now the point I approach is this, *mes amis*. Since with the death of Warrant there is no one for the law to impeach, it is to our mutual advantage that the unhappy truth of this affair should be withheld from the knowledge of everybody but our good selves."

Culver nodded vigorously.

"But how we're going to do that is another matter."

The Marquis revealed the palms of his hands.

"I, myself," said he, "am not without influence. For many seasons I was a member of the Chamber of Deputies. With a little encouragement it would be possible for me to—how do you say?—drop the word in a right quarter."

Venice and Rentyen exchanged glances. But it was Culver who spoke.

"By encouragement I suppose you mean that we should sell you back Renanceau at a bargain price?"

The Marquis smiled and shook his head. He said:

"I do not think you realise the value of what I am offering. Honour, happiness and careers are all at stake. My suggestion is that you *give* me back Renanceau in return for your future peace of mind."

Rentyen threw up his head and laughed.

"What a nerve!" he said. "But since I have no interest in the castle, Marquis, I suppose I get my peace of mind for nothing."

The Marquis sighed.

"It would be a great pity if the police were to take a critical view of the assistance you rendered Warrant on the night of his escape. It would be very bad publicity for you."

"And so what?"

The Marquis fingered his beard and looked at the chandelier.

"I have a little friend—her name is Lili. For a long while she desires to possess a coat of ermine, such as may be seen at Drullier's in Cannes. The price is not excessive. In English money six or seven hundred pounds."

Rentyen's mouth played mischievous tricks at the corners.

"But having given the lady the coat you are not afraid that she might feel under any sort of obligation to me to—er . . ."

"I think that would be only fair," said Venice, under a smile.

The Marquis de Renanceau drew himself up as stiff as a lance.

"You would not wish to insult me, Monsieur. Naturally the gift would come as from me."

Rentyen bowed and saluted.

"Take it as bought," said he.

Culver rapped his knuckles on the table and spoke with point.

"In making these suggestions, Marquis, aren't you forgetting that your own conduct hasn't been above reproach?"

“That, Monsieur,” was the reply, “is a condition which I have faced so often that my conscience is become, what is the word? callous. One of the few virtues I claim to possess is a knowledge of my own frailties. It is as a very humble sinner that I wait for your answer.”

“And if we refuse?”

“In that case, Monsieur, with the greatest possible reluctance, I should be compelled to sell the story of this strange imbroglio to the newspapers.”

Venice gave a little shivering sigh.

“Opportunity turns pride into a cheat,” she murmured. “But I think there has been fuss enough without that.”

“Too much, altogether too much,” Culver assented.

He did not want to appear too eager to accept the terms, for if the Marquis were to learn that Paul Ascherer had already absorbed his interest in Renanceau before he died, he might devise some means of getting a rake off from the insurance money. It was just as well that both the Marquis and Venice should believe that he still held a stake in the venture.

“Of course it’s blackmail,” he grumbled, “neither more nor less, but if Mrs. Ascherer is ready to agree.”

“More than ready.” And Venice nodded. “If only to help the Marquis to recover his honour, let him have his little castle on the sand.”

Napier Rentyen leaned across the table and touched her white hands.

“The one woman I ever met who always says the

right thing," he whispered; and added: "After all, there are better castles to be built in the air."

## 2.

In one of the London newspapers, under the caption

**LIFELONG FRIENDS DIE**

appeared the following:

Within a few hours of the death, from blood-poisoning, of Paul Ascherer, financier and millionaire, comes the news of the suicide of Clive Warrant. There is little doubt that this second tragedy was inspired by grief; the two men having been close friends for more than a quarter of a century.

Paul Ascherer leaves a widow but no children. An obituary appears on p. 11.

Clive Warrant, who some years ago was hailed as the most brilliant architect of the age, never fulfilled his early promise. There was a curiously fictive and imaginative quality about his work that few others have rivalled. Warrant had an equal reputation for wit and kindness and his friends declare that he was incapable of entertaining an uncharitable thought about his fellow-creatures.

Old Mr. Waring was reading it on the terrace at La Peruse when Venice came out to have a look at him.

Venice in black with a spray of white camelias, a

black sugar-scoop hat and the high white collar of her shirt fringing and framing the perfect oval of her chin, was a vision from which most men would have found it difficult to detach their eyes. But old Mr. Waring had his own and more comfortable ideas of beauty. She was well enough. A graceful and hospitable lady. Nothing could have been nicer than the way she had invited him to come up and recuperate at La Peruse. But, bless your heart, she couldn't hold a candle to Nurse Gillow for real comeliness. A candle, was it? No. She couldn't hold a match, nor yet one of those damned lighter things that never worked.

And it wasn't all beer and skittles living in a great barrack like that. Room after room and neither a photo nor knick-knack in any one to make them homelike. Give him something snugger than that, where the pipe smoke hung about in the parlour curtains and a man could smell his breakfast bacon frying while he was having a shave in the morning.

Mr. Waring turned his head eagerly at the sound of a woman's footsteps approaching. He was not very successful in concealing his disappointment when he saw that it was Venice.

"I'm afraid it's only me, Mr. Waring," she said. "Nurse Gillow seems to be busy on the telephone."

"Aye, that's right," he replied. "She's ringing oop one of these ere bus companies. I've been promoting the idea that she and I should travel about for a bit

in a charrybang—takin' our own time—stoppin' where we'd the fancy, and seein' the sights."

Venice arched her brows and spoke with mock seriousness.

"What a very disreputable idea."

Mr. Waring's eyes twinkled.

"I don't deny as some'd think so, but we've reached an age where we can please ourselves. If folks want to talk, let 'em. Between me and you I wouldn't wonder if we didn't give 'em something worth talking about later on."

"And between you and me," said Venice, "you couldn't do better. But you're sure you are well enough to travel?"

"Weight and age being equal I'm well enough to go ten rounds with any man. There wasn't mooch the matter with me. It was just a germ I picked oop. That an' bein' lonely."

Venice nodded.

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder. Let me know when the wedding is to be and I'll send you a present."

Mr. Waring chuckled delightedly.

"You will 'ave your fun," said he.

Venice picked up her bag which she had laid on the stone coping of the terrace.

"Here comes Nurse Gillow and I must be going. I've promised to meet Mr. Rentyen in Monte Carlo. He's seeing the Colonel off to England."

Nurse Gillow came bustling along the terrace with a cup of *bouillon* as Venice went down the steps.

"Wouldn't be you if you didn't get into conversation with some young woman," she remarked severely.

"That's it, start nagging at a man," said Mr. Waring, and unbuttoned his waistcoat as a tribute to the ease and comfort and contentment that was his. "You're all alike, the 'ole boiling lot of yer."

Venice found Napier Rentyen on the semicircular walk behind the Casino. His elbows were on a rail and his eyes were fixed on the far horizon. His chin was resting on a handkerchief held in cupped hands. From the shifting crowds behind came pleasant sounds to his ears: "My dear, that's Napier Rentyen." "There's Napier Rentyen." "It's Rentyen." "Look, Rentyen." Then the pleasantest sound of all, Venice's voice saying: "Faun."

He did not move his head, but ever so slightly his body recorded gladness of her nearness. He said:

"A lot of money has been made out of *Hamlet*, and an uncountable number of reputations. I can't see why I shouldn't have a shot at it."

Venice side-tracked the thought subtly:

"I have been reading the new play that arrived for you yesterday. The Turner play. It's extraordinarily good."

"It is? Tell me about it."

He turned, revealing blood on his handkerchief and a small jagged cut on his chin. Venice exclaimed and pointed but he made light of it.

"Just a scratch. Go on about the play."

"But how did you cut yourself like that?"

Rentyen looked a little sheepish.

"Well, it was rather funny, really. You know I went to see our Colonel off. He wasn't in what you'd call exuberant spirits. I think being persuaded to sacrifice the insurance money had got him down, but I jollied him along—found him a corner seat and bought him a *Vie Parisienne*. As the train was pulling out I flashed him a smile of farewell and I don't think he liked it."

Venice looked puzzled and he went on:

"I don't really blame him, but I do think it was bad strategy not to have put the window down first. I mean that sort of glass is quite thick. I only got a splinter, but he was dancing all over the carriage nursing his hand, the last I saw of him. Might easily have given himself lock-jaw. Not that it matters. He never had much to say. Is there a good part for me in the play?"

Venice sighed, but it was a happy sigh, for apart from him she had no child of her own.

"Dear Faun, promise me you will never grow up?"

And Rentyen said:

"What an angel you are. Look! Isn't that the King of Sweden? I can't remember if he knows me or not."

### 3.

Since the morning when Frenant read Warrant's confession under cover of an automatic, Farady had

not known a moment's peace. His failure to get the letter and destroy it was a lasting reproach. In a sense his failure to do so was responsible for Warrant's death.

Thanks to the influence of Renanceau and the hush-hush policy which attended the subsequent proceedings at the inquest, there had been no mention of Warrant's confession. The truth had been hidden not only from the world but from Richenda.

Venice, with whom Farady had talked it over a dozen times, insisted that she should be told the true circumstances of her birth. She argued that nothing could be worse than the knowledge that her stock was tainted with a streak of murder. But Farady was unconvinced. It was not that he lacked the courage to tell her. He lacked the vision to do so. His imagination was unequal to fathoming how she would receive the news. He did not know, of course, that she was already aware of it. Thus, it came about that both were concealing what was common knowledge to each other. And the result was hopeless.

In their talks together Farady felt that Richenda was trying to draw a secret from him. He felt himself tied up in knots—racked with uncertainties. He found himself becoming, against his will, more and more aloof from her. Secrecy was building up a wall between them. When she spoke to him he started guiltily. In his eyes she read the words "If only I dared take a risk and tell you everything!" But he

did not dare. Their talks waded among common-places.

“It’s good to see old Waring up and about again.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if he marries Nurse Gillow.”

“Nor me.”

Commonplaces and dead ends.

Then Farady said:

“What was that place Rentyen told us about? Le Vistaero. We might have a bit of lunch there?”

“If you like.”

Rentyen had said: “If ever you are uncertain if you love anybody or not, go to Le Vistaero and you’ll soon find out. It was pathetic to have to adopt an expedient of that kind.

During the short drive Richenda said:

“I can’t think why you bother to go on with it.”

“With what?”

“With us.”

Farady stared miserably at the road before him.

“You talk as if I didn’t love you.”

“You act as if you didn’t.”

Oh most foolish reticence! She knew that he was dying to tell her the truth. She knew exactly what he was seeking to conceal. She knew because, in the small hours of the night before, Venice had told her of the confession.

Venice holding her hands and speaking with the combined wisdom and gentleness of a mother and a woman of the world.

"I'm telling you this not only because love has made this man of yours too stupid for words, but because I want you to know how sorry I am you don't belong to me."

"That's nice to hear," said Richenda.

"It's true. I don't think you ought to resent Miles' silence. It takes years and years to persuade the average man that women don't only want to hear the pleasantest things; that in spite of the twisted way some of us go about the business of living, fundamentally we like the truth, plain, simple and unadulterated."

Richenda nodded vigorously.

"That's it. What I liked best was his frankness, but he's shut down on me. All my life I've been fobbed off with half-truths and concealments. I just can't stand any more of it."

"Tell him so."

"That wouldn't be the same. Maybe he thinks I'm not a fitting sort of person for a guy to marry. And maybe I'm not. But he's got to say so. Let him get it off his chest and hit me in the face with it."

And here was Farady staring at the road, unable to speak a word.

They parked the car and entered Le Vistaero through an archway in a white wall. Beyond the wall was paradise.

Le Vistaero hung like a bird to the bare sides of the mountain. A place of urns and pillars and little wooden balconies, with naked space beneath. They

were shown to a table beside the rails—poised in mid-air over a multi-coloured world. They were one with the sky and with the sea. The glass-thin music of a mandoline came to their ears. In their nostrils was the scent of flowers. Butterflies sailed by on lazy lilting wings. There was magic in it all.

The waiter said:

“Madame does not object to the edge of a precipice?”

Richenda shook her head. She was used to that. She rested her elbows on the rail and absorbed the breath-taking loveliness.

Then a woman began to sing. She sang of love—making love simple and easy of reach. Love was there for the taking.

Farady’s throat was dry and he spoke huskily:

“Right or wrong, I’ve got to tell you the truth.”

A sudden softness came into her eyes as she turned them to his.

“You don’t have to. I know everything. And unless you feel that a girl who’s nobody’s daughter . . .”

“Don’t dare say that to me.”

The old spirit was back in him. Richenda relaxed deliciously.

“Then there’s only one thing you have to do. Put your arms round me.”

“Like this?” and he held her fast.

“Like that. And say ‘Richenda . . .’”

“Richenda . . .”

She filled her lungs and let the words run like a stream.

"Richenda, you little bastard, I love you better than anybody in all the world."

The *Maître d'Hôtel* had to wait a long time before they were ready to give an order. And then they did not eat much—unless it was the air, promise crammed.

THE END

